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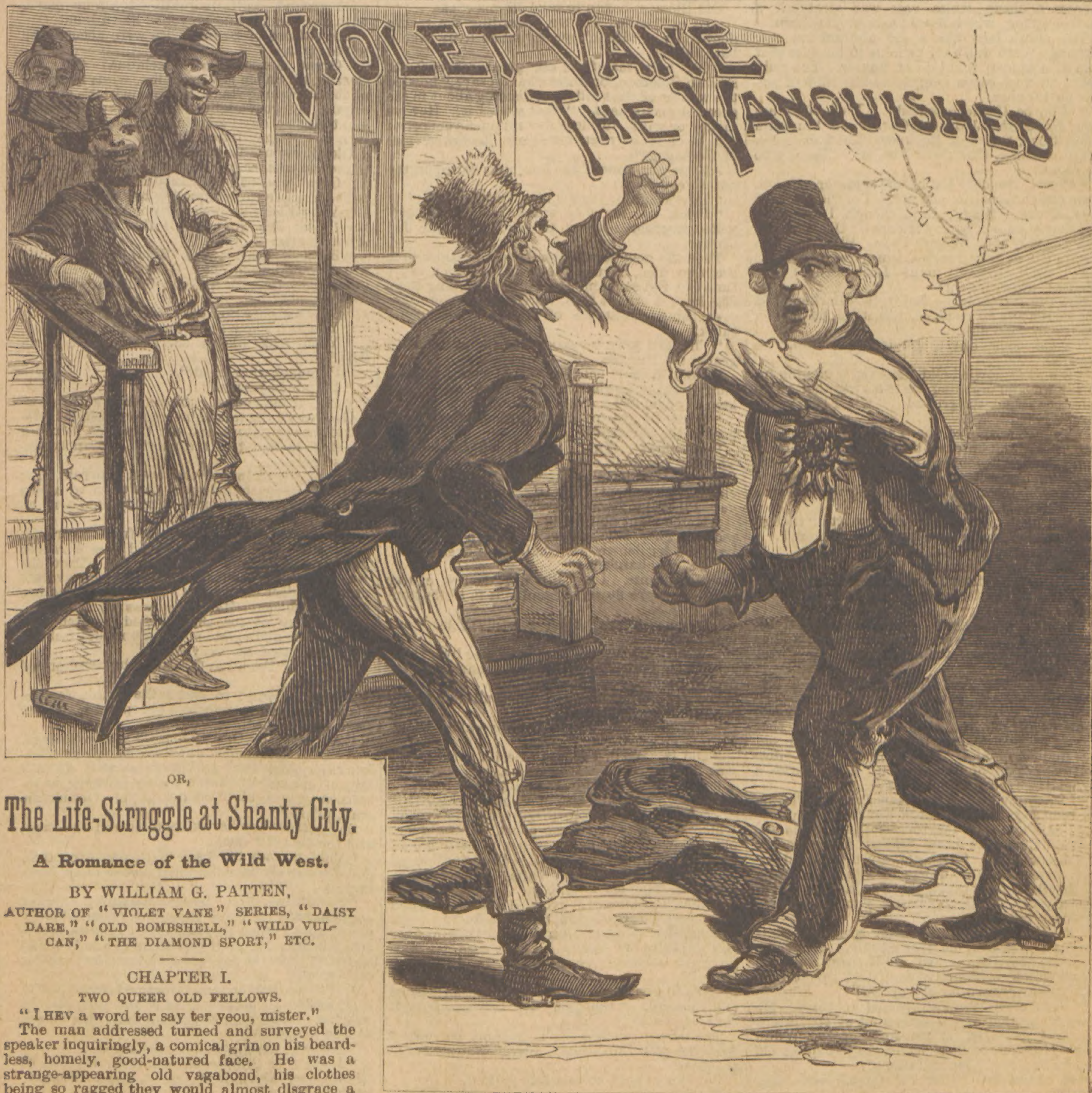
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OR, The Life-Struggle at Shanty City.

A Romance of the Wild West.

BY WILLIAM G. PATTEN,
AUTHOR OF "VIOLET VANE" SERIES, "DAISY
DARE," "OLD BOMBSHELL," "WILD VUL-
CAN," "THE DIAMOND SPORT," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

TWO QUEER OLD FELLOWS.

"I HEV a word ter say ter yeou, mister."

The man addressed turned and surveyed the speaker inquiringly, a comical grin on his beardless, homely, good-natured face. He was a strange-appearing old vagabond, his clothes being so ragged they would almost disgrace a scare crow; but, despite this, he evidently believed himself something of a dandy, for he wore

OLD BLOSSOM AND JED CORKER SHAKING THEIR FISTS IN EACH OTHER'S FACE, WERE CALLING EACH OTHER EVERYTHING DETESTABLE OF WHICH THEY COULD THINK.

a battered silk hat canted rakishly on one side of his head and conspicuously fastened on his breast was a huge sunflower. The man's hair was literally his crowning curiosity, for it was white and curly, closely resembling the wool of a sheep.

"Waal, I *will* be derved!" he chuckled, as he regarded with undisguised amusement the man who had spoken to him. "Great jehocus! Who be you, pard?"

The first speaker drew himself up stiffly, throwing back his head and glaring at the ragged tramp as if he would annihilate the old fellow. In that part of the country he was in no way less noticeable than the wearer of the sunflower, for the stamp of the genuine old-fashioned Down-East Yankee was on him.

And his attire!

Beginning with his head, he wore a sadly soiled white hat of the ancient "Horace Greeley style." His coat was a large, spike-tailed affair that ill fitted his spare and angular frame, and his gray homespun pantaloons were nearly four inches too short, the bottoms hugging tightly to the legs of the huge cowhide boots over which they were drawn. His shirt was a pink print affair, and around his neck was buttoned a paper collar. His necktie was of green bombazine. Across a cheap white vest was stretched a leather string, which served as a watch-chain.

The man's face was a sad and solemn one, although there was a sly twinkle in his eyes that told of a hidden fountain of humor. The only beard he wore was a long, spike-like wisp of yellow on his chin.

"Who be I?" he repeated. "Well, sir, I am ther *Honorable* Jeduthin Corker, an' I'm from Clam Cove, taown of Rockport, Knox caounty, State of Maine, *that's* who I be, sir. Naow, who be yeou?"

"Wow! I'm only jest an' ole catamaran; still, I am one o' ther boys, *you bet!* I'm ther *Honorable* E-rastus Wagg, Esq., though I am most familiarly known by my friends as Ole Blossom, ther Sport o' ther Shaggy Pate. W'en I git on steam, I'm er holy disaster, I'm er ragin' cyclone—a b-a-a-d, b-a-a-d man! Look in me eye! Woosh! Now shiver!"

But the "Honorable Jeduthin Corker" did not shiver any to speak of. Instead, he made a gesture of contempt.

"Yeou look like a gol-derved tramp," he asserted.

"*Whut!*" howled Old Blossom, springing into the air and cracking his heels together twice before he struck the ground. "Kin I believe me ears?"

"Ya-as," answered the Yankee, as he leaped into the air and cracked his heels together *three times* before touching the ground, "yeou bet yeou can, b'gosh!"

"Do you mean fight?" and the ragged tramp glared fiercely at Corker.

"Jest like's not," was the cool retort; "though I do hate ter fight with a gash-derved bum."

"Who's a bum?"

"Yeou, for a 'sartainty.'"

"It's a base insinowashun! I'm an hones' man, lookin' out fer work an' repertashin."

Corker grinned.

"Work!" he sneered. "I'm belasted if I believe yeou'd know work ef yeou met it! and as for reputation—wal, the more ye had the worsen yeou'd feel."

"Thet's whar you make a mistake—a big, big mistake. Ef you'd only had ther 'sperience I've had steerin' clear o' work you'd know it fur as you c'd see it. Thet's ther way I'm lookin' cut fer it—lookin' out not ter find it. See? Haw! haw! haw! Jee-thutter! You do tickle me! W'y, you're a reg'ler jay from Pattagumpus."

"I s'pose by that yeou mean I'm some 'lation ter John Jay, the diplomaticus of the Revolution, but I hain't, though I do own a little farm daown at Clam Cove that Jason Slocum fit for in the Penobscot War. I hev got seven hundred an' sixty-nine dollars an' nineteen cents in ther bank at Rockland, an' that's more'n Jay Gould kin honestly say. But, this hain't whut I kem heur ter speak ter yeou 'bout."

"Waal, w'at did ye come ter speak of? Spit it out, an' not keep me hyer all day. Can't you see we're drawin' a crowd, an' ef thar's *anythin'* 'g'inst which me sensitive soul does revolt it is ther vulgar crewrosity o' a crowd!"

Suddenly the Yankee seemed confused. He glanced around at the little knot of spectators who had gathered on the steps of the White Eagle Hotel, in front of which the two queer old fellows had met, then he faltered:

"By chaowder! I guess I'll wait till some other time."

"Not by a derved sight!" nodded Old Blossom,

assuming the offensive. "You stopped me hyer, an' by ther holy poker! you've got ter tell me w'at fer! Me blood is up! I'm wuss'n a ragin' prairie fire w'en I'm started, an' I'm shore ter git started w'en I'm 'posed on! Woosh! Whoop-ee! Talk lively, you walkin' freak! Spit it out!"

At this, Corker braced up a little.

"Yeou be kinder keeful," he advised. "Ef I light on yeou, I'll chaw ye, like a painter from Molechunkamunk, gol derved ef I don't! Whut I want ter kneow is whut right yeou hev ter come foolin' raound Susie Swan?"

"Who's Susie Swan?"

"She's ther widdier-lady yeou war talkin' with abaout an hour ago. I want yeou ter kneow I hev ther fu'st claim thar, b'gosh!"

The sunflower tramp grinned broadly.

"Waal, by smoke!" he snickered. "This tickles me—it jest duz! Oh, jellusy, jellusy! thou green-eyed monster thet drives men ter madness an' wimmen ter perdishun! Hanged ef you hain't jellus, ole man!"

The Yankee looked abashed.

"Tain't no sech thing!" he cried. "But I'll knock yeour eye aout ef yeou don't keep away from *her*—I will, ur I hain't Ole Jed Corker!"

"Whoop-ee! Knock my eye out! Wow! I can't stan' *that!* I've got ter pulverize ye!"

Old Blossom began to take off his coat.

"Sa-ay!" called Corker, regarding the tramp doubtfully. "Hedn't yeou jest as lives take a bath fu'st?"

"Oh, holy sassafras! oh, great jehocus! oh, shade o' Solomon, Socrates Shakespeare!" howled the wearer of the sunflower, dancing about in the greatest excitement. "Thet settles it! Hev ye made yer will? Inside o' five minutes yer sperrit will be on its way ter ther Death Shadowed vales of Umbagog!"

At this point one of the laughing crowd on the hotel steps cried:

"That's right! Go for him, Old Blossom!"

"Brace up ter ther scare-crow, long-legs!" yelled another, seeking to encourage Old Jed Corker.

Then the members of the crowd took sides with the two men, urging them on, and in a short time Old Blossom and Jed Corker, shaking their fists in each other's face, were calling each other everything detestable of which they could think.

"I'll learn yeou ter spoon raound my Susie!" grated the Yankee.

"Your Susie!" snickered the woolly-headed old fellow. "I sw'ar, thet makes me laff! How long hev you had a claim on *her*?"

"None of yeour gol-derved business, you hoss-stable chromo!"

"*Chromo?*" Waal, now I *will* be derved! Thet ter me, ther only an' 'riginal Ole Blossom. Oh, you thunderin' long-shanked patent medicine advertisement! Let me putt my claws on ye! I'll shake ye out o' them togs!"

"Ketch right bolt. Old Jed Corker is alwus reddy. Ther boys uster call me a thutterin' hard lad ter daown, an' I hain't got over it."

"Oh, you hain't!"

"Nary time. I kin flip ary dashed critter that ever wore flowers or mulleins in his button-hole!"

"Great jeeswax! don't I wish Violet Vane wuz hyer!"

"Whut? Don't you wish who war hyer?"

"Violet Vane, ther best leetle man thet ever drored breath, you heur me!"

Old Jed Corker inspected the sunflower tramp with increasing interest.

"Did yeou ever know a feller called Violet Vane?" he asked.

"Did I? Waal, I should sneel a smole! We waz bussum pards in ther long ago!"

"Sa-ay, I've seen him!" in a loud whisper.

"Pard, yer han'!" also in a hoarse whisper.

Then, to the intense disgust of the crowd, which had expected some sport, the two queer old fellows shook hands warmly, their recent trouble seemingly forgotten. The mention of that magic name—Violet Vane—had acted like oil on the troubled waters.

"Waal, I'm blowed!" growled a dark-bearded and roughly-attired man, his scorn finding vent. "Hanged ef Dagger Dan o' Dead Diggins ever saw anythin' like *thet!* All you need ter do is go start a circus; you w'u'dn't need any bulletin'—"

"Waal, you need a *bullet* in your head!" cried Old Blossom. "I'm jest ther boy ter putt it thar, by smoke!"

The tramp reached for a weapon, but, like a flash, Dagger Dan drew a revolver and secured the drop.

"Down ye go!" he savagely gritted.

He pressed the trigger, but not with sufficient force to raise the hammer and discharge the

weapon, for Old Blossom flopped right down on his knees, shouting:

"Say, hold on! It hain't fair! Don't shoot! Great blizzards! I hain't armed! *Murder!*"

Dagger Dan started in undisguised contempt at the supplicating tramp; then, with an exclamation of disgust, he thrust the revolver into the holster at his hip and turned away.

CHAPTER II.

A "DAGO."

"HYER comes ther he'rse!"

The cry went up from the crowd in front of the White Eagle Hotel, as the regular stage whirled into view far up the trail.

Down toward the little town of Shanty City came the coach, the four horses being at a dead gallop, while the driver's yells and the pistol-like cracking of his whip awoke the echoes of the gorge. Any one unaccustomed to Hurrah Dick's manner of entering a town would have thought him deranged, for he stood erect, the reins in his left hand, the long-lashed whip in his right, one foot firmly planted, while the other rested upon the brake with sufficient force to keep the coach comparatively steady. And in that position he stood as securely as if on solid ground, skillfully guiding the four horses with one hand, while he yelled like a lunatic.

The citizens of Shanty City were accustomed to the sight.

"Great Jeroosalam!" exclaimed Old Jed Corker, his under jaw dropping, while he stared at the on coming stage. "Thet critter's got 'em argain, by gorymighty! He war tucken jest like that ther day I kem inter this taown. Must be a sort of eppylyptical fit."

Old Blossom was putting on his coat, but he paused to snicker in a derisive manner.

"Great jehocus!" he exclaimed.

The Yankee turned quickly toward him.

"Yeou'd best keep yeour gol-derved maouth shet!" Old Jed snapped. "I've hed jest sass enough aout of yeou!"

"Biff! You don't say! Waal, you're so jolly green you do tickle me! Go comb ther hayseed outer yer hair with a Kennebunk squaw's fine-tooth comb!"

"Go wash ther dirt off yeour face!"

"You look like a picter in a comic paper!"

"Yeou look like a scare-crow in a corn-field!"

"I'll punch your head!"

"I'll punch yeourn!"

"I never take punch; gimme whisky straight."

Once more the talk came to no result of interest to the spectators, and the two men mounted the steps to be out of the way of the approaching stage.

Up to the front of the hotel Hurrah Dick whirled the coach, bringing the team to a halt in a most skillful manner. Springing down, he opened the door, hat in hand.

A muttered exclamation came from the crowd.

The first passenger to descend was a rather gaudily-attired and befrizzled girl. That she was pretty was the instantaneous and universal decision. Her cheeks and lips were red and her eyes coal-black. Her hair was of a reddish tinge, being of the shade called "golden" by poets. The girl's clothes, though made of cheap material, fitted her very well.

"Irish, ur I'm a liar!" softly whispered one of the crowd.

The girl seemed to catch the words, for she glanced around in search of the speaker, and her dark eyes flashed.

"An' what av Oi be Oirish!" she exclaimed.

"Av Oi'm not as good as th' loikes av any Yankee runnygade Oi'll go burry me bid! Oi'm a dacent gel, an' Oi didn't coome heur ter be insulted by sech blatherskites as ye! Out av me way, pl'aze!"

She gathered up her skirts to ascend the steps, and the men fell back.

"That is, they fell back with one exception. Old Jed Corker came forward, hat in hand, bowing low.

"Permit me, miss," he said, assuming his most engaging air. "These thar critters don't kneow a lady (bow) when they see one. They're ignorant as hosses. I kin tell ther looks of a lady (bow) as fur as I kin see her. Permit me (bow) to offer my e-scort."

With this little speech, Corker crooked his arm and thrust his elbow toward the girl, plainly wishing to escort her into the hotel. She stared at him in disdain.

"An' who moight ye be?" she asked.

"I am ther *Honorable* Jeduthin Corker, of Clam Cove, taown of Rockport, Knox Caounty, State of Maine."

"Well, Misther *Honorable* Jeduthin Corker,

av ye doon't be afther gittin' out av this Oi'll break me knuckles on yer long nose, so Oi will! Yure nothin' but a nasty Yankee—a common bog-throttin' Yankee from Maine, the Protubition State. Kah!"

Old Jed was amazed.

Instantly the sunflower tramp stepped forward, his battered high hat in his hand and a broad grin on his homely face, which, by some peculiar twist, he had transformed into the countenance of a genuine son of the "Auld sod."

"Begorra, miss, an' it's th' thruth ye be sp'akin'!" he rodded, uttering every word with a roll of the tongue that gave his speech a rich Irish brogue. "Sorrah th' day Oi ivver set me oies on this haythen country! It's doown on me look Oi am, but Oi know how ter be a jintlemarn joost th' soame, av Oi hiv bin 'socyatin' wid Yankees fur th' larst siven years. Av ye w'u'd accipt me arrum—ah!"

The girl's face instantly changed, her look of anger being transformed to a smile of delight.

"Nivver a worrud av apology nade ye give," she assured. "Wan look at yez w'u'd show me ye wur an Oirish jintlemarn av th' auld school, th' Auld B'y floy away wid yer clothes. It's Maggie Magee as knows her counbrymin whin she sees thim, though Oi nivver expicted ter put me oies on wan in this haythen town. Its pl'azed Oi'll be ter hiv yer assistance, sur."

She accepted Old Blossom's arm, and the vagabond escorted her up the steps, giving Old Jed Corker a triumphant look as he left the pilgrim from Clam Cove on the lower step.

For a moment Old Jed stood staring after the crafty tramp, his under jaw dropped and amazement and disgust written on his face. Then he dashed his hat to the ground and jumped on it with both feet.

"Naow gol dern me!" he howled. "I'll never swaller that by chaowder! Ter think of that belasted scare-crow steppin' in like that an' kerryin' that gal right orf! I'll hev his skin—I will, by gosh!"

At the door Old Blossom paused a moment, saying loud enough for all to hear:

"Av ye'll excuse me, Miss Magee, it's a pointer Oi'll be afther givin av yez. Doon't allow thot auld spalapeen ter hiv anything ter do wid yez at all, at all. He is an illigant auld fraud, fer by me saoul! he has a wife an' siven small childer ter th' home av him, an' shtill he do be afther thryin' ter make a mash on ivery good-lookin' gel he sees."

"Nivver fear, sur," was the girl's reply. "It's nighly inther a fit he do be afther skeerin' me wid thot face av his. Av he wur th' larst marn in th' worruld, Oi'd not look at him."

"Oh, give me a gun!" yelled Corker, dancing with rage. "I'll kill that thutterin' skunk with ther sunflower—I will by hokey! I never war so 'sulted in all my life! Give me a gun! give me a knifel give me anything!"

"Then take that!" and as Hurrah Dick uttered the words, he gave Corker a kick that fairly lifted him off his feet. Then came a surprise for the spectators.

Springing up, Corker whirled on the stage-driver, and the first thing Dick knew, the Yankee had clutched him by the collar.

"Kick me, will ye!" howled the infuriated man. "Wal, by ginger! I'll Parn ye! Haow der yeou like this kind of fun? Mebbe yeou folks think Old Jed Corker don't 'maount ter skeersely nothin' at all, but he'll show ye he knows whut timber makes shingles!"

The old man shook Hurrah Dick as if the stage-driver had been a child, much to the amazement of the spectators, for Dick was known to be a hard man to handle. And the Jehu himself was in no way less amazed than the others.

"Hold on hyer!" he cried, in astonishment. "W'at in thunder an' blue-blazes are you tryin' ter do?"

"I'll show ye!" was Corker's retort, as he clutched a convenient part of Dick's pantaloons with his right hand, still holding to the driver's collar with his left.

One of the passengers, a big, bewhiskered fellow, was about to leave the stage; but the pilgrim from Clam Cove suddenly snapped Hurrah Dick off his feet and pitched him headforemost toward the open door of the coach. The driver's head struck the bewhiskered man fairly in the pit of the stomach, knocking the passenger backward into the coach with Dick upon him. There was a howl, a crash, and then both men went at it tooth and nail, fighting savagely. The horses were startled, and, no hand being at the reins, they suddenly sprung away, no one being able to check them.

Down the street went the unguided stage, the two struggling men in the bottom.

"Holy poker!" gasped Jed Corker, staring after the coach.

"Well you may say that!" cried one of the men in front of the hotel. "Ef Hurrah Dick don't shoot you at sight, I'm a liar!"

"Some o' us must foller an' stop ther stage!" cried another. "Ther hull blamed business 'll go inter ther Sink Hole ef we don't! Come on!"

Two or three saddled and bridled horses happened to be hitched near at hand, and as many men were quickly mounted on their backs and flying in pursuit of the runaway stage. By good fortune, they were able to overtake and check the frightened horses before the animals had gone more than two miles. Then the driver and the tewhiskered passenger alighted. Hurrah Dick offered an apology, which was accepted by the passenger; but to the surprise of all, Dick declined to return to Shanty City.

"You hain't goin' ter let thet critter off thet shook ye out, be ye?" asked one.

"Fer jest now I be," was the reply; "but you tell him ter look out fer me w'en I come round on ther next trip."

But Dick did not come round on the next trip. When the stage appeared in Shanty City next time, another man was on the box, and he explained Dick had resigned.

"Waal, I'm derned!" exclaimed one. "Ole Jed Corker knocked him clean out! He wuz 'shamed ter come back inter this town erg'in!"

Which was true.

About two hours after the arrival of the stage, the loafers in front of the Way Up Saloon were astonished to see a ragged organ-grinder appear before them. The man's face was dark and far from free of dirt, while he had the slouchy, rounded-over aspect of one accustomed to carrying a heavy load on his back. Observing the assembly, he at once swung down his organ and, without a word, began to play "In the Sweet By and By."

"Blame my eyes!" growled Dagger Dan, who was one of the loafers. "I'm hanged ef thet hain't an o'nery no-count Dago!"

CHAPTER III.

MAGGIE TO THE RESCUE.

"DERN an Eyetalian!"

"So say I!"

"They're bad's Chinamen!"

"Kirect!"

"Ought ter shoot ev'ry derned one!"

"Thet's so!"

"Lynchin' 'd be best."

The organ-grinder did not seem to heed their words if he heard them. There was a look of sorrow on his dark face, and he turned the crank in a mechanical fashion peculiar to those who follow his "profession."

"Hey, Bob," called Dagger Dan.

One of the loafers, a tall, raw-boned fellow with a hang-dog face, arose to his feet, replying: "Wal, pard?"

"Go take thet Dago by ther ear an' lead him up this way whar we kin git a nigher view of him."

"All right."

The man spat on his hands and rolled up his sleeves. In Shanty City he was known as Bouncer Bob, and he was a bully of the worst type. Dagger Dan was the only man whom he seemed to fear at all.

Straight out toward the Italian marched Bouncer Bob. The organ-grinder bowed and smiled in a sickly fashion, while he paused to hold out his hat, evidently expecting a contribution. But Bob only reached out and caught him by the ear, growling gruffly:

"Come on hyer, you! Ye're wanted! Step up lively!"

The amazed organ-grinder began to squeal.

"Oh, leta goa my ear!" he cried. "You hurta lika da crab when bita! Wow-wow! Hully cheel Greata Scot! Leta goa my ear! I comea 'long alla right! Don'ta hurta poora Coboto! Whata him ever done you hurta lika this?"

"Oh, come erlong hyer!" and Bouncer Bob gave him a jerk that nearly took the unlucky fellow's ear off, causing him to squeal louder than before.

"I hava de law on you!" he screamed. "I hava you 'rested for 'salta da battery! I maka you goa jail! I am da Counta Caboto! I maka you pay mucha mon' fer dis!"

"Haw! haw! haw!" r' roared Bob. "He says he's a count! Haw! haw! haw! Jest think of me leadin' a count by the ear like he wuz a pig!"

The spectators burst into laughter, and everyone seemed pleased but the unlucky Italian. On his face was a look of mingled misery and

anger. Bob led him along, and he dragged the organ forward.

Dagger Dan had arisen to his feet and stood with his hands on his hips, laughing silently at the—to him—amusing spectacle.

"Wal, wall!" he said. "Is this a reg'ler shore-nuff count? Great blazes! Who'd 'a' thunk it!"

"I ama da Counta Caboto," again asserted the organ-grinder. "I hava da harda luck—comea dis country—playa da org'. One, two, three day goa I hava da monk. Him vera good goa rounda picka up da mon'. Now him deada—Caboto alla 'lone in world—hava noa friend. Him hava vera harda luck."

Then the Italian began to sniffle and wipe his eyes; but he made a great mistake in trying to work on the sympathy of the crowd into which he had fallen, for they were hard-hearted and nothing aroused their derision so quickly as tears.

"Shet up that!" snapped Dagger Dan. "W'at d'yer take us fer, you soiled son of ther sunny land! Ef you don't stop snivvin' I'll punch ye!"

He lifted his hand and took a step toward Caboto, who shrunk back in apparent alarm, holding up one hand, while he cried:

"Don'ta, don'ta. You gitta yourself into trub'. You hitta me, I giva you da challenge—figta duel—killa you! Caboto vera bada man!"

At this the throng roared with laughter once more. The idea was too ridiculous for anything, so they thought. Dagger Dan was known to be a bad man with any kind of a weapon, and the thought of him figting a duel with the quaking organ-grinder seemed highly ludicrous.

"Oh, great Moses!" laughed Bouncer Bob. "Fight a duel! Whoop!"

The Italian turned his dark eyes on the bully.

"You biga boy—you baby," he asserted.

"You don'ta dare taka man of your siza—you taka man lika me. You keepa still it be better for you. Soma time you gitta your eye putta in da mournin'—gitta da puncha. Somea day you runa up 'gainst fel' hitta da harda blow lika Johna L. Sul'. Thena you wish you keepa still."

"I hain't skeered of any John Sullivan," boasted the bully. "I c'u'd lick him in three rounds."

"You licka him in your minda. Him vera bada boy witha him dukes—mea too. I taka da box' lesson—lerna da uppa cut, da boda blow, da dodge. I licka da boys."

And this assertion caused the loafers to laugh still harder than before.

"Reg'ler lightweight bantam!"

"Look out fer him!"

"Thar's blood in his eye."

"He's a bad, bad man."

Bouncer Bob's hand fell heavily on the Italian's shoulder.

"Sa-ay," drawled the bully, "I'll bet you can't lick a postage stamp."

"Geea-whiz! If I was not in da mournin' for da monk, I licka whisky stamp—data you! You bet goa soka data nose; gita 'nough reda paint to painta da town."

"Oh, wow!" shouted Bob. "I see I shell hev ter kill this yar Dago!"

"Hold on," commanded the Man from Dead Diggin's. "We'll hev some fun out of him 'fore we do him up. Take ther organ, Robert."

"All right, sir," and the bully at once proceeded to obey the order; but the Italian objected.

"No leta you taka da org'!" he cried. "You breaka—you steala! If I uo hava da org', no gita da mon'—starva."

"No, yer won't" assured Dagger Dan. "We'll giv ye a job."

"Joba—what joba?"

"Wheelin' brimstun'."

"No lika dat—harda work."

This caused another laugh.

"Perhaps you hed rayther burn?"

"Burna? Noa lika dat," and the Italian seemed decidedly puzzled about their meaning.

"D'yer know how ter dance?" asked Dagger Dan.

Caboto shook his head.

"Noa. Da monk' danca—deada now."

"Wal, you'll be 'deada' ef you don't dance," and Dan drew a revolver. "Let up on thet instrument of torture thar. Robert, hyer, will turn ther crank fer you ter dance."

The Italian seemed greatly frightened.

"Don'ta shoota!" he cried, holding up both hands. "Caboto dancea lika da monk'. I don'ta want be shot! Spoil da clothes; da hava hole 'nuff now."

"Oh, I won't sp'ile ther clothes—I'll jest putt ther bullet through yer head."

"Blowa out brain?"

"Yes."

"You don't hava to shoot there if want to comitta da suicida."

"W'at d'yer mean?"

"Don'ta hava da braina there."

"Wal, by thunder!" growled Dagger Dan. "Thet's er derved insult! Turn ther crank, Bob, an' we'll make ther skunk dance fer thet!"

Bouncer Bob obeyed, and by chance the organ began to play the "Irish Washwoman."

"Now spink her down," commanded the Man from Dead Diggin's, turning his revolver on the Italian. "Goin fer all ye're wu'th! Dance, you devil, dance!"

The unfortunate fellow obeyed, much to the delight of the spectators.

"Faster!" ordered Dagger Dan, shaking the revolver, threateningly. "Spink it down, or I'll stir ye up with bullets!"

"Noa stir uppa!" pleaded the distressed Italian. "Spinka down fasta!"

"Turn ther crank faster, Bob," commanded Dan. "Let's see w'at kind of stuff ther Dago's made of. Whoop! Looker them feet! Oh, glory! but he's a dancer. Faster, Bob, faster! Go in'ter it, greasy skin! Move them feet! Ef you try ter run I'll drill ye!"

In that manner the unlucky fellow was forced to dance till he was ready to drop from exhaustion, while the spectators shouted themselves hoarse with delight.

From the steps of the White Eagle Hotel Old Blossom had witnessed all that was transpiring. As long as the toughs did not offer to molest the Italian he remained a passive spectator.

"But, by jehocus! ef they hurt ther pore galoot, I'll jest wade inter 'em!" he muttered. "They'll see w'at kinder stuff ther Sport o' ther Shaggy Pate's built of—yes, they will! I kinder want'er git at that thar varmint o' ther black b'ard. He hed ther drap on me oncet, but ther old man hain't ter be cotched thet thar way ev'ry time. Hullo!"

The exclamation was caused by a shot from Dagger Dan's revolver, at which the dancing Italian leaped high into the air, uttering a sharp squeal of pain or fear.

"Dance faster!" commanded the ruffian with the revolver. "If you handle them thar feet too slow, I'll shoot off yer other boot-heel."

"So thet's their game!" and Old Blossom produced a pair of long-barreled revolvers. "Waal, I reckon ther time fer me ter take a han' hes come. They'll find me a b-a-a-d man with ther gun, 'specially ef I hev ther drap."

But, just as he was about to descend from the steps, a female form shot past him and hastened across the street.

It was Maggie Magee, and without any hesitation, she placed herself in front of the unlucky Italian, her eyes flashing fire, as she shook her clinched fist at Dagger Dan, crying:

"Ye murderin' thafe av th' worruld! Ye'd make illigant fruit fer an apple-tray av ye wur hanging by th' neck from wan av its limbs! Yez m'ane ter murder this poor crayther, but ye sha'n't do th' loikes av thot! Av ye do roon this toown, ye'll foind wan person thot hain't afeerd av yez!"

CHAPTER IV. A COMPACT.

"WAL, I ber derved!"

Dagger Dan uttered the exclamation. He was amazed beyond power of expression.

"Ther Irish gal!"

"Looker her eyes!"

"She's a daisy!"

"She's a holy terror!"

The men in front of the saloon uttered the exclamations one after the other. Brave Maggie Magee flashed them a look of scorn.

"Ye're a noice lot av ducks!" she cried. "Av yez doon't be afther gittin' out av this, Oi'll loight on yez an' scratch th' oies out av ye, so Oi will noow!"

And she looked as if she would keep her word. "Hully chee!" ejaculated the organ-grinder, as he paused to stare in admiration at his fair defender. "Girl heapa good looka! She hava da grita!"

"You don't mean ter stand up fer a derved Eyetalian, do ye?" asked the Man from Dead Diggin's, gazing at the girl.

"Eyetalian, ur not it makes nivver a bit av diffrence, sur. He is human, an' Maggie Magee will sthand up fer him!"

By this time Old Blossom had reached her side.

"Roight yez be, Miss Magee," he nodded, drawing his revolver. "Ye're a gel afther me own harrut. Eyetalian is it? Divvil a bit av diffrence will thot make! An wan av ye'timpts ter loay a harnd on him, Oi'll blow a hole

through him larruge enoough fur a windy ter a thraee-shitory house!"

The crafty vagabond was keeping up the appearance of being of Irish blood, hoping to remain in Maggie's good graces in that manner.

Bouncer Bob gave a howl.

"Holy Moses an' ther prophets!" he shouted. "Are we ter be bluffed in this yar manner? Let me git at thet woolly-headed son of a gun! I'll chaw him up!"

"Noow do be afther puttin' a chain on yer toongue!" and Old Blossom turned his revolver on the blatant speaker. "Oi'm a very bard marn ter joomp on, me duck!"

"Caboto cara da revolver-r-r-r," observed the Italian, as he produced a heavy weapon. "I thinka it very gooda plan to goa arm. It looka lika da hava me in fix. P. O. G.—putta up job on me. I noa lika dat. Shoota boota heel. I noa lika dat. I shoota heada off da whiskers. He noa lika dat."

"Thot's th' stoof!" chuckled Old Blossom. "This is kinder turnin' ther tables on ther skunks. Whoop-ee! Av they doon't kape shtill, it'll be th' worrust fer thim!"

Just then Old Jed Corker appeared on the scene.

"Waal, whut's all this raow about?" he inquired, gently stroking the yellow beard on his chin, while he stared inquiringly about. "Seems like there war trouble brewin' heur, b'gosh! This seems ter be ther weakest side, so I cal'late I'd better j'ine 'em."

And, to the surprise of every one, the Man from Clam Cove drew an old-fashioned horse-pistol and placed himself at the side of Maggie Magee opposite Old Blossom.

Thus the party made quite a formidable showing against the toughs.

Dagger Dan looked disgusted.

"All fer er derved Eyetalian!" he grunted. "Ther critter hain't wu'th it!"

"We're too menny fer 'em, boss," hoarsely whispered Bouncer Bob. "Just guv ther word an' we'll jump 'em."

Dan shook his head.

"No, we won't make any row over ther Dago."

The bully was amazed.

"Dyer mean ter let them ride over ye?"

"No; but thar's a gal thar."

"Blame ther gal!"

"She's good lookin'."

"I reckon you're stuck, boss."

Dagger Dan turned savagely on his satellite.

"Waal, you hain't got no right ter reckon ary derved thing 'bout it!" he growled!

"Stuck ur no stuck, I hain't goin' ter let thet gang git ther best of me," sullenly asserted Bob. "Ther boys'll back me, an' we'll jump 'em."

"You won't do northin' of ther kind!"

"W'y not?"

"'Cause I say so!"

"Be you goin' ter let the Eyetalian git off?"

"Fer jest now—yes. We'll tend ter him ef he hangs round Shanty City."

"Waal, I s'pose it'll hev ter be as you say," and the disgusted bully turned abruptly and entered the saloon, leaving Dan to settle the affair in any way he chose.

It was soon settled.

The Italian secured his organ and left hurriedly, having brokenly thanked his friends for what they had done. Old Blossom and Jed Corker escorted Maggie Magee back to the hotel. The Man from Maine waited on the steps till the vagabond appeared, then he motioned to Old Blossom to follow him.

"Ding my eyes!" muttered the wearer of the sunflower. "I'm in fer it now. Ther ole galoot's laid fer me, an' I'll hev ter take it. Wal, he'll find me a hard boy ter down, het yer socks!"

He did not hesitate about following Corker, and the Man from Clam Cove led the way to a spot where their conversation would not be liable to be overheard. Then Old Jed suddenly turned on the tramp, only to find a revolver held in the woolly-headed man's hand thrust against the very tip of his nose.

"Howdy-do," grinned the vagabond. "I'm right hyer, large as life-size an' jest as natteral. Ef you hev called me out hyer ter down me, you'll find you hev tackled er powerful hefty job. I'm a howler frum Hurrycane Gap, I bel I'm a screamer frum 'Way Back, an' common critters hunt their hoels an' prepare fer Gabriel w'en I let off steam in a good old-fashioned yoop. They think ther Day o' Judgment hes cum."

But his words did not seem to impress Old Jed Corker in the least.

"Rats!" cried the Yankee, contemptuously. "Yeou tork too gol-derved much with yeour maouth!"

Wagg gasped for breath.

"Jeewhiz!" he cried. "Do you durst say thet ter me—me! Holy heavings! Are you prepared fer deestruction?"

"Rats!" once more burst from Corker's lips. "Yeou make me tired! I didn't call ye aout heur ter fight."

"Dido't?"

"Naw."

"Honest Injun?"

"Honest Injun."

"Waal, w't is yer game?"

"Hain't no game at all. I only jest wanted ter speak ter yeou."

"But I thort you wuz mad."

"Waal, I've got over that. Yeou kin have ther Irish gal ef yeou keep away frum ther widder."

"It's er barg'in!"

Blossom held out his hand, and Old Jed grasped it warmly.

"I have wanted ter git a chainece ter tork with yeou ever sense yeou spoke abaout Violet Vane," he asserted.

"You don't mean ter say you know Sweet Violets?"

Corker nodded.

"I jest do."

"Waal, by jehocus! Kin you tell me whar he is now? I've bin buntin' all over ther lot fer him. Hain't seen him sence he left White Water City so suddint. He an' I uster be pards. He's ther best leetle man on ther top side o' this great an' ga-lorious 'arth!"

"Right yeou be, pard. But he kem mighty nigh not bein' on ther top side."

"When? Whar?"

"Not very long ergo, daown ter Magic City. Some critters kem nigh daownin' him. He war doin' a leetle detective work, an' he hed ferreted aout a mighty crooked game. One of ther crooks hed done bloody murder, an' he knowed he'd hang fer it ef Vane warn't put aout of ther way. They jumped him, an' when I left he war in bed, but ther doctor said he'd come raound all right. I took ther trail of ther critters as bested him, an' I have follered it heur."

"Ter Shanty City?"

"Yas."

"Hev ye spotted 'em?"

"Naw. They hev managed ter keep aout of my sight, though I know purty well they are heur. By this time Vane oughter be on his feet. Ef he is, he won't be long follerin' ther critters ter this taown."

"Oh, great scrumagin' scullwoppers! Ef he comes hyer, I'll see him oncet more! Ther thort fill's me buzzum with emotions too powerful fer utterfication! I have loved thet man—I love him still! I hev fit, fought an' fiddled fer him, an' I am reddy ter lay down me life in his defense! I'll stan' ter his back tell ther breast-works are shot clean offen him! I'll wade through seas o' fire an' rivers o' blood fer him! Ef he comes hyer—Great jehocus! It makes me purty nigh crazy ther think o' it!"

The tramp executed a wild dance of delight, giving vent to a perfect imitation of a rooster's crowing. Jed Corker seemed interested.

"Sa-ay," he drawled, "yeou may be ther very man I'm lookin' fer. Tell Vane duz come I need somebody ter kinder help me along in searchin' fer Elegant Ed an' Burt Bishop. Ef yeou an' I c'u'd form a partnership—"

"We'll do it, ur my name hain't Wagg!"

"Will ye?"

"Shore!"

"Yeour han'!"

A warm grasp sealed the compact.

CHAPTER V.

FIFTY DOLLARS FOR A LIFE!

As Dagger Dan o' Dead Diggin's entered the 'Way Up Saloon after the affair with the organ-grinder, he was met by a rather rakish and vulgar-appearing young man, whose derby hat was tipped far down over his left eye and whose hands were buried to the very bottom of his trousers pockets. He was smoking a very black and rank-smelling cigar.

"Well, you're a good one, you are!" scornfully remarked the rakish young man.

"W'at's gnawin' ye now?" growled Dagger Dan, pausing with his hands on his hips.

"You're a rum cove, you are!" nodded he of the black cigar, a leer in his eyes and sarcasm in every word.

"Ef you've got anythin' ter say, spit her out," ordered the Man from Dead Diggin's. "Don't be browsin' round ther bush all day!"

"You make me weary!"

"Waal, you're makin' me weary with yer blamed chin. Fire erway!"

"Why didn't you do his jiblets?"

"Do his jiblets? Who?"
 "Oh, you don't know—no, no!"
 "I'm hanged ef I do!"
 "Got a bee in your bonnet to-day, eh? I should say so! Thick-headed, you are?"
 "Say, I hain't goin' ter fool with ye," and Dan's hand fell heavily on the young man's shoulder. "I'm from Dead Diggin's, a place w'ot c'u'dn't exist 'cause ther 'habitants all killed each other off an' wuz diggin' graves more'n they wuz diggin' fer yaller. I don't stau' no foolin'. Talk straight, boy!"
 Something like a derisive smile passed over the face of the one addressed, but he lifted his hand to his cigar in a manner that concealed the look, while he mumbled:
 "Well, there isn't any need of your flyin' off the handle, old cove. Keep cool and simmer. I want to chin you a little."
 "Fire away, then; but don't talk no foolishness 'less ye want ter git fitted fer plantin'!"
 The younger one glanced around, as if to make sure no one was listening, then he whispered:
 "Stl! Let's git a move toward the corner there. I have an ear-ache for you."
 "Ef you've got ter tork," growled Dan, speaking loudly enough for the inmates of the saloon to understand, "kem over hyer in ther corner whar we kin sot down."
 The young fellow raised no objection, and the Man from Dead Diggin's led the way toward the corner, where they were soon seated in some chairs at a table, on which Dagger Dan rapped heavily with the butt of a revolver, at the same time shouting to the barkeeper:
 "Bottle of whisk' an' two glasses hyer! Stir yerself, critter!"
 The dispenser of liquid refreshments hastened to obey the order, and soon the two men were drinking.
 "Now," said Dagger Dan, setting down his empty glass, "ef you hev got any blamed thing ter say ter me, say it."
 This was spoken loud enough for any one to hear if they chanced to be listening; but, immediately lowering his voice to a more cautious tone, he added:
 "What is the row?"
 "I want to know why you didn't wipe out the old cove when you had the snap on him?"
 "What old cove?"
 "Why, the pretended hayseed, of course."
 "Why should I wipe him out?"
 "Why! I should think you would ask that!"
 "Well, I do ask it."
 "Well, because he is our enemy."
 "What makes you think so?"
 "I have good reasons for thinking so. If I'd been in your place, I'd salted him for keeps."
 "Well, why didn't you come out and salt him?"
 "It wasn't my row."
 "No?"
 "No. So I didn't chip in."
 "You were looking out for your own precious neck!" declared Dan, contemptuously. "Bishop, the more I see of you, the greater becomes my conviction that you are a coward."
 The young fellow's face flushed a bit.
 "This to Bowery Ben!" he guardedly exclaimed. "I wants yer ter know I'm one of the hard boys of New York. I live on Tough Alley; de funder up yer goes de tougher it gits. I live in der last house."
 "Oh, rot! Let up on that kind of talk now! You are not playing Bowery Ben with me. That will do for the rest of the town. You play the part well enough, and I make a very good bad man."
 "That's because they don't know you."
 "I am not so sure about that. I came to Shanty City a stranger, and, by playing the part of Dagger Dan o' Dead Diggin's, I have won the reputation of chief. If I had not been a fairly good man, they would have downed me long ago."
 "Well, we won't discuss that; but if I had been in your place—"
 "What?"
 "I would have perforated Old Jed Corker."
 "What have you against that old jay?"
 "Are you blind, Tom?"
 "I reckon not."
 "Well, you must be if you do not see through that old whelp. He is our meat!"
 "Now talk out just what you mean."
 "The old man is in disguise."
 "Ha! Think so?"
 "I know it."
 "Well?"
 "He is after us."
 "Sure?"
 "Sure as fate."
 "You may be wrong."

"I am not."
 "You must have a reason for thinking so."
 "I have. This very day a man from Magic City was in this saloon, and he spoke of the racket there."
 "So?"
 "You bet it is! He spoke of us."
 "Ha! What did he say?"
 "That we'd be lynched if the men of Magic ever got their hands on us."
 "Ha! ha! ha! They'll never have the pleasure."
 "That was not all."
 "Go on."
 "Violet Vane is on his feet!"
 This seemed to startle Dagger Dan, for he fell back in his chair, an exclamation of dismay passing his lips.
 "As soon as this?"
 "Yes."
 "Two weeks ago it was not certain he would recover."
 "No."
 "He must be a tough one!"
 "I fear we shall find him so before we are done with him."
 "Shanty City will be a bad place for him to come. There are more ruffians than honest men here."
 "That will not daunt Violet Vane."
 "Dern him! We ought to have finished him in the cellar!"
 "We would if we had been given half a minute more. The gang came down on us just in time to save him. Old Bob Shucks fooled us well."
 Dan nodded.
 "He did. What did you say the old fellow's right name is?"
 "Daddy Duzenberry."
 "A name and a half! But he is a crafty old sinner."
 "You bet!"
 The glasses were filled, and the two rascals drank. For the time they had thrown off all disguise before each other, dropping the dialect they usually assumed to carry off their parts.
 "It sticks me why you think I ought to have bored Old Jed Corker," confessed Dagger Dan.
 "It ought not to stick you."
 "All the same, it does."
 "Didn't I say Violet Vane is on his feet?"
 "Well, you don't mean to say Corker is Vane?"
 "No."
 "I thought not. Such a thing is impossible. Vane is a man slightly below medium height, while Corker is a tall, lank man—"
 "Like Bob Shucks."
 "Holy smoke!"
 As he uttered the exclamation, Dagger Dan brought his fist down on the table with a thump that made the bottle dance and the glasses rattle. His companion tipped back in the chair, a smile of satisfaction on his lips.
 "Well, you have got it through your head at last, eh?"
 "Old Jed Corker is Old Bob Shucks, otherwise Daddy Duzenberry!"
 "Right you are, mate."
 "Well, I swear!"
 "I don't blame you; you had a good chance to drop the old fool."
 "No, I did not. If I had fired on any one of the party, the ragged tramp who calls himself Old Blossom would have dropped me. But you had the chance to do the 'Honorable Jeduthin Corker.'"
 "I? You must be daft!"
 "Not a bit. You had the chance."
 "How?"
 "From the window. You saw it all from the window?"
 "Yes."
 "I knew it. You might have dropped him without a bit of trouble."
 "It would have been murder!"
 "Murder—bah! Are you so very squeamish?"
 "I do not care to have human blood on my hands."
 "Oh-ho! Dainty, eh? Well, I'll wager you did not stop for such scruples when you shot Mark Marden."
 "But I did not kill Marden."
 "Which was not your fault; your intention was good enough, and you fancied you had done the work well. I hired a tough to put old Dan Marden out of the way, and we both played for the old whelp's property. It would have been ours had not this cursed Violet Vane thrust his nose in!"
 "That is true enough. You cannot hate him more than I, for has he not won Lona's love from me?"

"Won her love from you—no! You never possessed her love."
 "Well, I tried hard enough to win it."
 "That is true, Burt Bishop; but I know she is far too good for you."
 The younger man turned savagely on Dan.
 "Now let up on that!" he snapped. "I have heard enough of that kind of talk! She is *your* sister!"
 "Which is the worse for her. I am a miserable cuss, and she is a most unfortunate girl for having such a brother. Sometimes I wonder if the same blood runs in our veins. I have tried to make that girl do crooked work, but I never came anywhere near success before the little game at Magic! There she played the part of Marion Marden quite well, and, as before said, we would have been successful had not Violet Vane dipped in."
 "And by this time Lona would have been my wife."
 "Yes."
 "Now—"
 "Now it is doubtful if she ever is."
 Dagger Dan's companion lunged across the table and caught the Man from Dead Diggin's by the arm, glaring angrily into his face.
 "Do you mean to break your word with me?" he hissed. "If you do, by Heaven! I will kill you and her both!"
 "Spare your threats," sneered Dan, his white teeth gleaming for a moment through the black beard. "You knew me in Magic as Elegant Ed, and there I was not a man to be bluffed or driven. You know me here as Dagger Dan, and still I will be neither bluffed or driven. I care nothing for your threats."
 The young fellow's hand fell below the level of the table, but Dan laughed:
 "Don't take the pains to draw! If you do so, it will be the worse for you!"
 "Do you mean to keep your word, Tom?"
 "Yes."
 "Lona shall be mine?"
 "I have promised to use my influence toward that end, and I will do so; but I cannot promise she will be yours, for she has sworn she will kill herself first."
 "All talk."
 "Do you think so?"
 "Yes; she will not dare."
 "You do not know her. She will dare *anything*!"
 "She must marry me!"
 Dagger Dan took another sip of whisky, settling back in his chair as he did so, regarding his companion closely. In a moment he spoke:
 "It is well enough to say she must, but she will not be driven. Coaxing is all that will ever bring her to it, and I have little faith in that. She is obstinate as the devil when once her mind is made up. However, she can be nothing to you till Violet Vane and his pards are put out the way. Vane will surely follow us."
 "You are right."
 "It is probable this Daddy Duzenberry has been sent on ahead to keep track of us."
 "Of course."
 "He must die!"
 "I am glad you have arrived at that conclusion."
 "Yes, he must die; but I do not want to do the job. There is the very man for it!"
 He pointed to Bouncer Bob, who was just taking a drink at the bar.
 "Yes, he is the man," agreed the younger.
 "Hey, thar, Bouncer!" called Dan. "Come over hyer."
 The bully soon came slouching up.
 "W'atcher want?" he demanded.
 Dan motioned toward a chair.
 "Sot down, pard," he said, assuming the dialect in keeping with the character he was playing. "I want ter chin with ye a bit."
 Bob accepted the chair.
 "All right, let her flicker," he nodded, taking a seat at the table and deliberately turning out a brimming glass of whisky. "Hyar's lookin' at ye."
 "I've got er job fer ye," explained Dan.
 "A job?"
 "Yep."
 "A job?"
 "That's w'at I said."
 "Good-day!"
 The tough immediately arose to depart, but Dan caught him by the wrist and jerked him back into the chair, growling:
 "Sot down, dern ye! W'at's ther matter, anyhow?"
 "Wal, ye needn't think you're goin' ter git me ter do any work! Woof! Work! Great horn spoon! It makes me tired ter think of it!"

"I didn't say it wuz work; I said it wuz a job. I want ye ter cut a throat fer me."

Bob's face instantly brightened.

"Oh, is that all? Great Scott! I thort mebbe you wanted me ter saw some wood ur suthin' of thet sort. Ef you've got any delicate leetle business like woosle-slittin' ter be 'tended ter, I'm jest yer man. All ther same, you've got ter pay me—pay me handsomely."

"You shall be paid, pard."

"W'y don't ye do ther job yerself?"

"I hain't ther time ter bother."

"Wal, I'll make time, though my business is powerful pressin' jest now. Who's ther victim?"

"Ther old varmint as calls himself Jed Corker."

"Not that old hayseed?"

"Yep."

"Thunder! w'at a picnic!"

"Perhaps not so much of a picnic as you may think. He looks like a hard man to down. He may be er reg'ler ole deceiver."

"I'll resk thet. How much'll you guv ter hev him salted fer keeps?"

"Fifty dollars."

"No?"

"Yep."

"Will ye advance ten?"

"Yep."

"It's a go. Ole Corker's goose is ther same as cooked!"

CHAPTER VI.

VAILED VEDA.

SHANTY CITY had a mystery. It was in the form of a female, apparently young, although the citizens could not be sure about that, for she always wore a veil. In some way she had come to be known as Vailed Veda.

Late each afternoon the veiled girl, accompanied by an old woman, who also wore a veil, rode down the gulch for an airing. The men of Shanty City were accustomed to watch for them near a certain hour each day, and if by any chance they failed to appear, the disappointment was universal.

Everybody longed for a look behind the veil which concealed the girl's face, but it was always closely drawn and thick enough to baffle prying eyes.

"It's jest er derved shame!" one fellow had exclaimed. "I know thar's er purty face behind that veil, an' she don't hev no right ter keep it kivered up in thet thar way."

There were others who echoed the words.

Toward night of the day when the organ-grinder appeared in Shanty City, the two women rode out, as usual, taking the accustomed route down the gulch. Jed Corker and Old Blossom were among those in town who watched till they disappeared from view.

Some distance beyond the limits of the town the two females came upon Caboto, the organ-grinder. The Italian had propped his instrument in a leaning position against the rocky wall, while he was seated on a small boulder, greedily gnawing at a crust of bread.

At sight of the Italian, Vailed Veda uttered a cry of gladness, attempting to draw rein. The old woman remonstrated against this, speaking in a harsh voice.

"You shall not stop!" she declared.

"Shall not!" exclaimed the girl. "What right have you to say that? It is too much!"

"Come along, I say!" snapped the woman.

"It is nothing but a dirty Italian."

"I see that; so why are you afraid? I wish to hear him play."

"Play! Nonsense! You must like to hear a hand-organ."

"It has been so long since I have heard music of any kind that even a hand-organ can give me pleasure. I heard this one in the distance to-day, and its tones are particularly sweet. I want to hear it again."

"Well, I suppose you will have your own way."

"About this I assuredly shall. You may look after my horse."

A moment later Vailed Veda was on the ground. With wonder expressed in his dark eyes, the Italian watched her approach; but he arose to his feet, where he stood, bowing low, his shabby hat in his hand.

"Oh, sir!" cried the girl; "I want you to play for me."

"You wanta me to play on da hand-org?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Vera well; I lika dat. I play for you."

The girl seated herself on a boulder, and in a few moments the Italian began turning the crank. The first piece happened to be "Johnny, Get Your Gun." The organ-grinder laughed and said:

"Gonny gita your gun-jua-gun. Gonny needa dat he come outa here. No hava gun, gita in bada scrape—gita planted. Caboto no hava gun ready whena want it—no quicka 'nough—other fel' gita dropa. Caboto no like dat."

Veda laughed at the Italian's queer words and manner, and he also laughed.

"Girl lika da hand-org?" he asked.

"Just now I do very much," she answered.

This seemed to please him.

"Vera fine girl," he declared. "I lika you. You no turna nose uppa at pora Caboto."

"How do you know that?" she laughed.

"You cannot see my nose."

"No see it; Caboto speaka ina da figur-r-r-r. He no speaka Engleesh vera gooda; he be educate' in own counter-r-ra—he be Counta Caboto."

"Ah! a genuine count in disguise! Well, I declare, this is romantic!"

"Noa, noa! Caboto nota in disguisea—in da harda lucka—walka on him uppas. Spenda all his mon' by da carda—losa his pr-r-oppata. Then come to this counter-r-r-ra—buy da hand-org, gitta da monk, picka uppa da monk, goa back and buy da whole of Italy."

The idea was so queer that Veda was forced to laugh again; but the Italian began to snifle and sob.

"Hava harda lucka," he asserted. "Losa da monk—die. I hava burra him—no hava him to picka uppa da monk. Caboto alla 'lone now. He gitta it in da neck."

It was plain the "count" had been able to pick up considerable slang since coming to America, and he seemed to know how to handle it with skill.

"I likea you," he declared once more. "Why you keepa face cover alla time?"

"I am obliged to do so."

"Obliga—how obluga?"

"Oh, it is necessary."

"'Fraida da sun tanna da complex'?"

"No."

"'Fraida whata?"

"Nothing."

"Oh, girl tella da truth? Begga da pard! Caboto speaka fore him thinka."

"That is all right. Play something else."

"Alla right; play da Ireesh Washawom'. Da monk' usa dance whena play data. I neva gitta 'nother monk' lika data one! He know allamost everything."

So, again wiping his eyes, the Italian played the rollicking tune of the Irish Washawoman. When he had finished, Veda clapped her hands.

"Good, good!" she cried. "You can play that as well as anybody who can turn a crank."

"Some man say dat, I licka him; you say dat, I thinka it da compla-a-ment."

"Come, come!" harshly called the old woman on the horse; "are you going to stay here all day, Veda?"

The Italian quickly turned toward the speaker. "She finda da good comp', she lika stay. See?"

Evidently this did not please the older woman, for she snapped out a sharp reply, to which the Italian complacently responded:

"You hava da quick temper-r-r-r. What for you weara da veil? You 'fraida da sun spoil da complex? He! he! he!"

This made the woman angry.

"I will not wait longer for you, Veda!" she declared.

"Very well," returned the girl, quietly; "I can walk back. You need not wait."

"Oh, yes! I suppose you would like that very well! If I left you here, we would not be likely to see you again."

"Perhaps not," was the calm confession.

"Well, I will not leave you."

"Girl runa 'way?" inquired the organ-grinder, with a show of interest. "What maka girl runa 'way?"

"None of your business!" snapped the woman.

"Alla righta," returned Caboto, cheerfully.

"I letta uppa on dat. Hully chee! It maka me thinka, alla sama. It looka queera."

"Play once more," entreated the girl.

"Alla righta."

This time "Home, Sweet Home" was the tune, and it brought tears to the eyes of the listening girl.

"How sweet—how sad!" she murmured, unconsciously speaking aloud. "And I have no home—no home!"

There was a look of sympathy on the Italian's face.

"Noa home!" he repeated. "Caboto hava noa home! Data piece make him eye water-r-r."

He paused to wipe his eyes, and the very thing happened he was looking for.

The girl had taken a handkerchief from her pocket, and she lifted her veil to wipe her eyes

while the organ-grinder was occupied in a similar manner. But Caboto's eyes did not need wiping nearly as much as he pretended, and the crafty fellow was able to obtain a fair look at Vailed Veda's face.

Readjusting the veil, the girl arose to her feet. From her purse she extracted a piece of silver and offered it to the Italian; but he shook his head.

"No taka dat," he said, bowing once more, with his tattered hat in his hand. "I hava da pleasur-r-r-r; dat pay vera well."

But she insisted he should take it, and he was forced to do so. He was still bowing and smiling when she lightly mounted to the saddle, and he watched both women till they disappeared toward Shanty City.

"Alla righta!" he muttered, with satisfaction. "Da Counta Caboto no maka da mistake. Geea whiz! Gooda lucka!"

CHAPTER VII.

VIOLET VANE.

BACK into Shanty City rode the two women. But few words passed between them on the return trip. The sun had set and the shadows of evening were gathering when they stopped by a large building on the outskirts of the town. The building years before had been a way station for the mountain stage line, but it was deserted for that purpose when Shanty City became a town of some importance, and the White Eagle Hotel took its place. The old building had been struck by lightning no less than three times, for which reason no one cared to live in it till Dagger Dan appeared. When they told him the bulk was ill-fated he simply turned up his nose and laughed in derision. He was able to buy it for little more than a song.

When the place fell into Dagger Dan's hands it became a "tough hole," to call it by the name given it in Shanty City. The very worst people in the town gathered there beneath the banner of Dagger Dan, to use a figure of speech, and some high old carousals were held in the place.

That was before the appearance of Vailed Veda in Shanty City. With the coming of the girl, "The Den," as the old house was designated, underwent a change. It became more orderly, and only certain people were admitted within its warped walls.

Those who had the run of The Den to a certain extent still found the veiled girl a mystery, for there was a part of the house forbidden to them. That portion was partitioned off from the rest. True, the partition was thin, but it served its purpose.

When the veiled girl and the old woman returned to The Den, they dismounted and their horses were taken in charge by a big, awkward, stupid-appearing boy. The girl led the way into the house, and the woman followed. Soon they were in a scantily furnished room.

"There!" cried the girl, tearing the veil from her face; "I am glad to get that off! I hate it!"

The face revealed was a handsome one, though it was not flushed with as much color as it should have been after a dash in the saddle. Her eyes were of the purest blue, her hair golden-brown and her teeth like pearls. About her was an indescribable charm that immediately attracted and fascinated the beholder.

"I am sick of this life!" she cried, her chin beginning to quiver in a manner that indicated the fount of tears was none too safely sealed. "I wish I were dead!"

She flung herself down on a rude couch and lay there with her face pressed into her hands.

The girl's companion also un veiled, and the face revealed was—

A man's!

Deliberately he removed the feminine attire and stood forth in garments suited to his own sex.

In Shanty City he was known as Bowery Ben, and he was the bosom pal of Dagger Dan.

When he was free of the dress he folded his arms and stood regarding the prostrate girl for several moments. So still she lay he fancied she had fainted.

"Lona!" he called.

No reply.

"Lona!"

She still remained silent.

Swiftly he approached her and bent over her. Just as his hand touched her shoulder, she sat up, crying:

"Don't touch me!"

A yellow light sifted in at the window and fell on her pale face, making it seem little short of haggard and ghastly. The light was a reflection of sunlight as it glimmered for one last fad-

ing moment at the very peak of an eastern mountain.

Bowery Ben started back, an involuntary exclamation parting his lips.

"Lona!"

"Don't call me that!" she almost screamed. "You have no right to do so!"

"Are you going mad, girl?"

"No, not mad; but I hate you, Burt Bishop—hate you! hate you!"

She had arisen to her feet and stood confronting him in the shadowy gloom that filled the room. He shrunk before her indignation.

"You know not what you are saying, Lona," he protested.

"I know full well what I am saying. I despise you—despise the very ground you step on!"

Had the light been a little stronger, she might have seen how deeply her words cut, for his face paled and he bit his nether lip.

"Why should you hate me so?" he finally succeeded in saying. "What have I ever done—"

"What have you done! What haven't you done? You have never done anything to win my respect and esteem!"

"But I am ready. Tell me one thing to do."

"Will you do it?"

"If possible."

"Then leave me—never let me look on your face again. That will cause me to think of you with more respect than I do at present; that will prove if you are ready to do anything to win my esteem."

He did not move.

"Ah!" she cried; "you will not go?"

"No."

"I knew it! You said you would do anything possible, yet you refuse to do the first thing asked."

"It is not possible."

"Not possible?"

"That is what I said."

"And why?"

"Because I love you so dearly and—"

"Stop! I have forbidden you ever again speaking to me of love!"

"You have, but my tongue is not to be silenced in such a manner. You are dearer to me than life—dearer than—"

"I will not listen!" she screamed. "Leave me, Burt Bishop—go, go!"

Again he refused.

"I am not to be driven away. Your brother has promised you shall become my wife."

She drew herself up to her full height.

"What right has he to make such a promise? I am not his child."

"But he is your brother."

"Still he can force me to marry no man. It is useless for him to try. I hate you, and I will die before I will marry you!"

"Now, what is the use, Lona? It is all a foolish prejudice. I am not a bad sort of fellow—"

"Oh, you're not?" with deepest scorn. "You are a scoundrel of the blackest dye! I know you for what you are worth!"

"I am as good as your brother."

"Fully as good! Sometimes it scarcely seems as if that man can be my brother! In no way are we alike. What right had he to drag me away from Magic City as if I were a child? He came there and forced me to leave the town—did not even give me a chance to let any one know I was going. What right had he to do that?"

"It was for your good."

"I do not believe it!"

"And still you do. You know how bold a game we were playing at Magic—a game that was defeated. You were our principal agent—"

"Say tool! That is what I was—your tool!"

"Have it as you please. Anyway, you were as deep in the mud as we were in the mire. Our actions were criminal, and we were forced to skip when the game was exposed. You stayed behind to nurse that cursed sport who ruined our plans. They did not molest you for a time, but they really intended to arrest you after awhile. It was for that reason Tom and I got you safely away and that is why we keep you here in secrecy. The bounds of the law are searching for us all, and—"

"There, I have heard enough! It is the same old story you have told me twenty times before! I do not want to listen to it again. I am here—"

"But you would give us the slip if you could. I almost believe you would go back to Magic and that cursed sport! Lona, you love that man!"

"Do you say that? Well, have it so: I will not deny it. No, no, I will not deny it, for I do love him!"

He sprang forward and caught her by the wrist, thrusting his face close to hers while he hissed:

"I knew it! Oh, curse him! I wish I had him here! I would crush the life out of his body!"

"You crush the life out of his body! You could not do it! He is strong—he is brave! Ah! he is a noble man!"

"And you say that to me!" thrusting her off at arm's length. "Gods! What a fury there is in me! I could kill you now! I love you, still I hate you! No other man shall ever possess you, for I would rather see you dead! Rather than let you go to another, I would strangle you with my own hands! Perhaps you hope Violet Vane will follow you here? Well, if he does, he will come to his death!"

With that he gave her a savage thrust from him, and she fell on the couch once more.

"Lie there!" he snapped, then he turned and left the room.

The poor girl did lay there. She did not weep, but her condition was that of one dazed. Shortly after her would-be lover's departure an old woman entered the room, bringing a light, which she left there, after closely drawing the curtains. She paid little heed to the poor girl on the rude cot.

The girl buried her face in her hands, as if to shield her face from the light. Thus she lay as the minutes became hours. How much time passed she did not know—did not care. Her mind was far, far away. She was thinking of the one she loved, and, quite unconsciously, she sobbed:

"Vane, Vane, come to me!"

"Lona, I am here!"

Then, before she could cry out, she felt herself gathered in the arms of a man, and held close to a heavily throbbing heart, while a trembling hand was pressed over her mouth, thus preventing her from uttering a scream that would arouse the house. Her eyes were turned on his face, and she saw—

Violet Vane!

CHAPTER VIII.

VANE AND LONA.

It was well Violet Vane took the precaution to cover the girl's mouth with his hand, otherwise she would have uttered a cry that must have brought others rushing to that room. He held her close, close to him, and gazed into her blue eyes as if searching her very soul.

And she?

At first she could not believe it was really Vane. She had left him sick in bed and delirious a few short weeks before—had been snatched from his side by her unnatural brother. Was this really him? Was it not his spirit?

No, no, no! It was no spirit; it was a man of flesh and blood. She felt his warm touch—she felt his strong heart pounding against her very bosom! He was there—he had come to her, as if in answer to her call!

"Lona!"

Once more he whispered her name. How it thrilled her! It set every nerve a-tingle with mad delight. His hand was removed from her mouth, and he bent his head toward hers. Nearer, nearer, till their lips touched—till their very souls seemed to meet in that clinging kiss!

Then he held her off a bit, once more gazing searchingly into her blue eyes. He seemed trying to discover something there. She returned the gaze, but there was a world of happiness in that one look.

"Lona, I have found you!"

"Yes, yes!"

She could say no more, although she tried to do so. The words refused to come.

"Why did you leave me?"

Then came the first thrill of bitterness to adulterate her joy. Why did she leave him? Because she was forced to do so. How could she explain so he would understand? She dared not tell the truth at once—she would not tell a lie.

"Do not ask me that—please!"

"Why not? You left me without a word; no one knew whither you went. I cannot understand. I have often wondered at it; but I felt sure you could explain it all when I found you."

"I cannot."

A shadow fell on his face.

"Lona—"

"Vane, Vane!" she panted, clinging close to him; "do not speak of that now! Is it really you? I am so happy—happy! Do not kill all my joy at once! I feared I should never, never see you again! Oh, it was so cruel to leave you

there! You were helpless and— But I do not want to speak of it! I only want— I know not what I want! I am nearly deranged with joy! Oh, Vane, Vane! my darling!"

In truth she knew not what she was saying. The words seemed to come in spite of any effort to repress them. She laughed and sobbed in a breath—she wound her warm arms around his neck—she kissed him again and again!

"Is it not all a dream—a happy, happy dream?" she whispered. "Can it really be the truth? I almost doubt! You are alive and well again—but you are pale!" seeming to notice that fact for the first time. "The color has not come back to your face."

"And my strength has not returned entirely," he explained. "I am far from being the man I was before my sickness."

"But you will be all right soon—I know it. How many times I thought you were dying as I remained at your bedside! It would be at the dead of night, and you would lay there so pale and ghastly—like a corpse. You would not seem to breathe, and your eyes would be closed. Then I would bend over you and listen for your breathing. I would hear it, faint—so faint! But it gave me hope—it gave me joy. You still lived!"

"Then at times you would be out of your head and would rave of things that had occurred. Sometimes you would speak to me—would call to me again and again. All that would quiet you would be for me to come to your side and take your hand. Then you would become quiet—then you would fall asleep. And there I would sit for hours, my hand in yours, daring not remove it least you awaken. Oh, but I was happy then!"

"My angel! Yes, my angel, for you were a ministering angel to me! I can never forget it—I will never forget! Lona, Lona, my love!"

Again and again he kissed her. She did not resist—no, no! Happiness had come to her again, if only for a few minutes. What more could she ask at that time?

"Sometimes I feared you would die—and then I feared you would get well! Yes, I dreaded to have you get well!"

"Why, Lona?"

"It is true, for I feared your restoration to health would be the signal of our separation. I feared you would look on me with scorn and loathing when the light of reason returned to your eyes! Oh, you can never know how I dreaded that! It would be worse than a thousand deaths! Sometimes I longed to die—sometimes I prayed to die! If you had died, I know it would have killed me!"

He pressed her closely once more, but uttered no word, although his heart was full of wonder that she should have deserted him when she cared so much for him. She seemed to read his thoughts in his eyes.

"I cannot tell—I cannot tell!" she moaned. "They said you would get well, unless something quite unlooked-for occurred."

"And then you left me?"

"How can I tell you? I was forced to do so! It would not have done for me to remain."

"Why not?"

"You should be able to answer that question, for you know all about the cruel game I was forced to play in Magic City. I was an impostor—an adventuress! You had heard my confession—you knew the truth. If I had remained, I might have been arrested—imprisoned!"

"And that is why you left me? Oh, Lona! did you not know I would stand by you to the end? Did you doubt me, Lona?"

Her face grew crimson.

"How could I be sure you would not despise me?"

"And that is what you feared?"

"Yes."

"Had I not told you I loved you?"

"Yes, yes!"

"And did you doubt my word?"

"I feared you would change. When you came to think of it more seriously—when you came to consider the enormity of my crime, I feared you would spurn me."

"Oh, thou of little faith!"

There was reproach in his words—his eyes—his face. She felt it, and it crushed her. She put her hands before her face, piteously pleading:

"Don't look at me in that way—don't, don't!"

"If you had but trusted me, Lona!"

"How could I know? They told me you were a detective, and Tom always said detectives would employ any means to gain an end. How did I know you were not deceiving me when you professed to love me? That might be a part of your game to get at the criminals in the case; you might be using me to learn the truth. Oh,

do not be too hard with me, for I did not know—I did not know!"

"It is but natural your brother should tell you such things, for, having a criminal record, he has reasons to hate and dread all officers of the law. But I am no detective. It was only by chance I played the part of detective in the Marden case. I ruined your brother's plot to obtain Dan Marden's wealth, and that satisfied me. I should not have pressed the matter further, although Mark Marden, the old man's son, would have been sure to do so. As it is, he has sworn to hunt down Thomas Lewis and Burt Bishop. He will keep his word, and I am here to save you."

"Save me?"

"Yes."

"I do not understand."

"You are liable to be arrested with the others. If you were, and Mark Marden should press the case, the result might be serious. Your only safety lays in leaving your brother—abandoning him to his fate."

She caught her breath sharply and pressed her hand to her bosom.

"Abandon him to his fate!" she hoarsely repeated.

"Yes."

"Oh, no, no, no!"

"You must!"

"I will not!"

"Lona, you must be mad! Think of the disgrace—the horror! Think of being arrested and—"

He suddenly checked himself. He would not speak to her of being imprisoned. But she divined what he would have said, and she passionately cried:

"I have thought of it all a thousand times. It will kill me!"

"And still, for the sake of this unnatural brother who forced you into this terrible scrape, you will remain here?"

"He is still my brother. True, he has changed—he is not the same as of old. Once he was gentle and considerate—so thoughtful of his little sister. I can not forget those old days of long, long ago. He grew wilder as he became older, and mother feared for him. Sometimes she spoke to me about him. 'Lona,' she would say, 'you must look after Tom when I am gone.' I promised her to do all I could to keep him straight, and I have kept my promise."

"Yes, you have kept your promise; you can do nothing more. He would drag you down to ruin. Now is the time to escape!"

"Ah, I can not! I can not! Mother would not want me to desert him now!"

"Foolish girl! Can it be you are in your right mind? Leave him—go with me! I will make you my wife! Far, far from here we will be happy together! Come!"

Oh, the look in those blue eyes! For one mad moment the girl hung swaying between love and what she believed was her duty. Then came another thought that decided her.

"No," she said, firmly, "I can not go with you. It would not be right. If you married me, it would only be to despise me in time."

"Lona!"

"Stop! Hear me out. The blade of justice would hang suspended over my head like the Sword of Damocles. At any hour, any moment, I might be arrested—torn from you—hurried away to prison! I would still be a criminal, though I were your wife! You can not want such a wife as that!"

"They should not touch you."

"And you would be shielding a criminal! Ah, no! It is not for us. I can see it all now. How foolish I was to pray that you might come to me. It were better you stayed away. You have only come to leave me again, and the parting will be bitter, bitter!"

"There shall be no parting. If you will not go willingly, by the gods! I will carry you away by force!"

How those words stirred her blood. If never before she had loved the man, it seemed as if she must have loved him then.

"Would you really kidnap me?" she asked, just a trace of wonder in her voice.

"I will do anything to possess you!"

How could she withstand such love when she loved the man in return?

"You must be mad!"

"Yes, yes! mad with love of you, my little one—my darling! Nothing shall take you from me!"

"You will ruin all with your passion! I love you as truly, but I know my duty."

"Duty! It is not duty! You do not understand the truth! You place yourself in a false position!"

"That is the way you look at it. But you are in the greatest peril here! How did you get in here without alarming the house? How did you know I was here?"

"I saw Vailed Veda, the Mystery of Shanty City. You might hide your face behind a veil, but I would know your form! I know your every motion! I saw you come here, and when it was dark, I followed."

"But how did you get into the house? All the doors are kept locked."

"Close to the northern side is a tree. One of its branches brushes a window. From that branch I entered by the window."

"Ah! And you run so much risk—for me?"

"For the chance of one look into your heavenly blue eyes, my darling!"

"Foolish boy! What if my brother or Burt Bishop should find you here now?"

"A struggle would follow."

"And you are not strong!"

"My love for you—the thought that your eyes were on me would give me strength."

"It would be a terrible thing for them to find you here. They would surely kill you if they could."

"I feel as if I would be a match for them both."

"But, a cry from their lips would summon a dozen ruffians from the other part of the building."

"That is true, for I descended the stairs and peered through a crack into a room of the other part. There I saw several men gambling, while as many more were sleeping on bunks about the room. The place is a regular den, and those men are—"

"Criminals, one and all—men on whose heads there is a price! And my brother is their leader! He expects he will be pursued by officers, and these are the men he will have to destroy the bloodhounds. It is a regular outlaw band, but they try to keep its existence a secret in Shanty City. If you were detected here and discovered by those men, it would mean a swift and certain death!"

"Then fly with me at once, Lona. We will find our way out and escape. If you refuse—"

"What?"

"Ah! that is it! What shall I do if you refuse? It will drive me mad! Lona, Lona! have some compassion on me! You are choosing between me and your brother! Which will you have? I am ready to lay down my life for you; but if you turn me away—well, there will be nothing to live for then."

Once more she wavered. She read the despair in his face. Could she turn him away hopeless? No, no, no!

"You must go now," she panted, thrilling at the thought that she might yet yield to him. "I cannot leave now, but—but—"

"But what?"

"Perhaps I will do so, if you will only give me time. I must think of it a little longer; I must have one more talk with my brother."

"And then—will you go?"

"I dare not promise. Perhaps—perhaps!"

"Then I will hope. Under no other circumstances would I consent to leave you. You will not fail me in the end—I know you will not! You shall become mine—all mine!"

Once more he held her close to his heart and kissed her. She started from him.

"Hark!" she whispered. "I fancied I heard a sound at the door. Some one may be coming. Go, go!"

"Yes, I will go now—"

The door was flung wide open, and Burt Bishop leaped into the room, a revolver in his hand. Pointing the weapon at Vane's head, the young ruffian shouted:

"If you do go, it will be straight to hell! I am here to kill you!"

CHAPTER IX.

A BRUTAL BLOW.

BURT BISHOP's face was corrugated with passion, and the blackest of black resolves glared from his eyes. There was murder in his look.

Vane faced him without quailing, making no move to draw a weapon, for he knew such a move would be the signal for a shot that might mean his death.

For several seconds the two men glared into each other's eyes. Bishop longed to pull the trigger and send a bullet into the daring sport's brain, but a power other than his own seemed to hold him in check.

With both hands pressed over her throbbing heart, her face white as that of the dead, Lona stared at the striking tableau, feeling powerless to make a move.

Vane was the first to speak.

"Well, what do you want?"

The words were uttered coolly enough.

Bishop laughed harshly.

"By Jove! you have gall!" he cried. "What do I want? Well, I want your life!"

"You are modest in your desires!"

"Sarcasm will not save you, my dandy. I hold the drop, and I am going to bore you."

"Well, why don't you do it?"

"Oh, I am not quite ready. I want to tell you a thing or two before I kill you. I do not want you to die too suddenly, for there would be no satisfaction in that. You have tried to come between that girl and me, and I want you to know what will become of her after you are safely planted out where the daisies grow."

"This girl is nothing to you!"

"Oh-ho! You think so, eh? Well, there is where you make a big mistake. On the other hand, she is nothing to you. She has fooled you in great shape, as you shall discover. I want to let you know what a dupe you have been—I want you to know it before you die. You fancy she cares for you. Ha! ha! ha! She never cared for you! In Magic City she led you to fall in love with her, in order that we might ensnare you the more easily; and but for old Daddy Duzenberry the game would have worked. She staid by your side when you were sick, but it was our will that she staid there. We wished her to poison you, and she agreed to do so, but her courage failed her. Then she deserted you—"

Up to this point Lona had silently listened to the blackening of her character, her tongue silenced by amazement and horror; but now she broke out, wildly:

"It is a lie! Do not believe him! He lies, lies, lies! Oh, the miserable wretch! how I hate him! He would drag me down—he would make you believe me such a miserable creature! It is false, false!"

"Ah! she plays her part very well!" admitted the man with the revolver. "She is a superb actress—Lona is. And she has promised to become my wife when you are dead and buried, Violet Vane. Ah! I almost fear you will not rest easy in your grave! You will be deep, deep in the cold, cold ground, and Lona will be in my arms. These will be pleasant things for you to think of as you are dying!"

"You devil!" grated Vane. "I wish we were evenly armed and alone in this room!"

"If wishes were horses, etc. But I have told you the truth, however bitter it may taste."

Lona sprung toward him, crying:

"Take it back, Burt Bishop—take it back!"

"Out of the way!" he shouted. "I will kill him!"

"Never!"

She flung herself upon him and grasped his hand, thrusting it upward. As she did so, the revolver was discharged.

With a sudden surge, Bishop sent her reeling from him, but in that brief space of time Violet Vane had seen his opportunity and improved it. Before the young ruffian could use his revolver to a deadly effect, the sport was on him.

"Now we will see who is the best man!" he cried, grasping the revolver and trying to wrench it from Bishop's hand.

"Right you are!" returned the young ruffian, as he closed with Vane.

For the time the sport had forgotten his recent illness and the fact that he had not fully recovered his strength. He only thought he was fighting for life—and Lona!

Clinching the two men swayed back and forth, their teeth set, stern resolve depicted on the face of one, black murder on the face of the other.

"That shot will cook your goose," asserted Burt Bishop. "It was heard in the other part of the house, and within two minutes my friends will be here."

Lona heard this, and she sprung to the door, instantly closing it. The door had been provided with a strong lock and a bolt, and the girl made it secure. Bishop caught a glimpse of her movements, and cried, derisively:

"That will do no good. They will burst it down in a minute!"

Which she feared was true.

Vane found himself scarcely a match for the stout young ruffian, and it is doubtful how long the battle would have lasted had not Lona found a way of aiding the sport.

Upon a nail at one side of the room hung a shawl. This she snatched down and approached the two men with it in her hands. Bishop did not see her movements.

Quick as thought the shawl was cast over the head of the young tough and drawn tightly about it in such a way that he could scarcely

catch his breath. In fact, he was in danger of suffocation.

In this manner he was soon deprived of his strength, and Vane hurled him heavily to the floor.

Then came a thundering at the door, and Dagger Dan's voice shouted:

"What in blazes is ther row in thar!"

Bishop was held down in such a manner that he could not reply, but it seemed that the Velvet Sport was trapped.

What was to be done?

"I will have to fight them all," said Vane, calmly.

"No, no!" softly cried the girl. "The window!"

"I would have to leave you!"

"And I am not ready to go with you now. Leave me, leave me!"

"If I go, will you give me reason to hope?"

"Yes, yes! I will promise anything—anything! Only go!"

"I will do it; but do not forget your promise. I shall return."

While she still held the shawl about Burt Bishop's head, he sprung up and dashed to the window. Tearing aside the curtain, he found it fastened; but, raising his foot, he dashed out glass, sash and all.

Just as he did so the door was burst in with a crash, and several men, led by Dagger Dan, poured into the room. Dan caught a glimpse of a human figure disappearing through the broken window, and he took a snap-shot at the individual. The bullet whistled harmlessly out into the night.

Burt Bishop was just struggling to his feet, gasping for breath.

"What in blazes does this mean?" demanded Dagger Dan, catching the young ruffian by the shoulder.

"Mean?" gasped Bishop. "It means—Violet Vane has—been here—and escaped!"

"Great smoke!"

"That girl—helped him to get—away."

"Out an' arter ther critter, pards!" shouted Dagger Dan, turning to the men. "Ef you ketch him, blow him cold! Don't let ther whelp escape."

The men wheeled toward the door.

"Go with 'em, pard," commanded the Man from Dead Diggin's, speaking to Bishop.

"Spur 'em on; make 'em find ther galoot!"

"But you—"

"I'm goin' ter hev a word with this gal!"

Burt Bishop knew better than to stay after that, although he paused to say, entreatingly:

"Don't hurt her, Tom."

When they were alone, Lona boldly faced her brother, for Dagger Dan was Tom Lewis in disguise. He folded his arms and glared at her in a savage manner.

"Well, I suppose you think you are smart!" he sneered. "Oh, what a precious little fool you are!"

That aroused her quick temper; her eyes flashed, and she boldly returned:

"Yes, I am a fool to have anything to do with you! I ought to let you go to the dogs, but on account of my promise to mother, I have clung to you as long as possible."

"Clung to me! Bosh! You have worked against me in every way you could! You betrayed us to this infernal sport in Magic City, and you would betray us to him again! Is that the way you clung to me! I have fooled with you as long as I am going to. Now—"

"Well, what now?"

"I'll bring ye ter yer senses, ur kill ye!"

She did not shrink from him, but a look of pain settled on her face.

"You may kill me, Tom," she quietly said; "but you can never make me what you wish."

"We will see. I hope the boys will catch that infernal sport and drag him here! If they do, I will end his life before your very eyes!"

"Oh, Tom, Tom!" came a trifle brokenly from her pale lips; "how changed you are!"

"Oh, let up on that!"

"You are not like my big, brave brother of old! You are so different it scarcely seems you can be the same person. I loved you in those old days, Tom, and you used to love your 'little sis.' Don't you ever think of those days, brother? I think of them so often—so often! Sometimes I dream of them. It was only last night I dreamed we were back at the old home again—I was happy and thoughtless in my girlhood, and you were the same brown-faced, barefooted brother of the past. We were playing down by the little brook where we used to sail our shingle ships. You remember that, Tom?" She crept to his side and sunk on her knees at his feet, clasping one of his hands in

both of hers. "Oh, those were happy, happy days! You remember how we would sometimes watch our tiny ships float off down the stream till they disappeared in the big black woods, and we wondered if they would float on and on till they reached the ocean. How we used to long to know what the world was like over beyond the blue Dixmont Hills! That was so far, far away! We wondered if we should ever, ever go beyond those hills. I would to God we never had!"

The cry went up from a heart filled with anguish by thoughts of the cruel change that had occurred. The girl began to sob brokenly. He tried to shake her off, but she still clung to his hand.

"You have not forgotten those old days, Tom? Mother was so proud of her children—poor mother! How many times she got us ready for school, and we started off together, hand in hand. Sometimes we would go away into the back pasture to play among the rocks, and when we were tired, you would bring me home on your back. She would be watching for us from the open doorway, and you would shout to her as soon as we came in sight. She loved to hear your voice, Tom; and father was so proud of you! Sometimes I think of the cows as they would come up the old lane and stand lowing at the bars; and oh! these memories make me sick at heart!"

Once more he tried to release his hand, but she would not let it go.

"Do you ever think of poor mother's grave, Tom? It is there in the little country cemetery. We buried her beneath the willow tree. I used to strew flowers over the mound. And to think that she died of a broken heart because you—Oh, Tom, Tom!"

There was a real look of sorrow and pain in the man's eyes, for he was touched; but, with an effort, he crushed back his feelings and gave himself over to the brutal part of his nature.

"Get up here!" he snarled, snatching the girl to her feet. "Now let up on this sniveling! I won't stand it!"

"Oh, Tom!"

"Oh, blazes!"

And with this exclamation, he lifted his open hand and dealt her a blow that sent her staggering to the floor, where she lay in a shuddering heap, staring up at him with a look of horror and reproach in her blue eyes, her golden hair being freed from its coil and falling in confusion about her neck and shoulders.

With clinched hands, he stood above her, his face black with the evil passions which swayed his sin-deformed soul.

CHAPTER X.

THE "WIDDER" IN TROUBLE.

VIOLET VANE was not found by Dagger Dan's tools. The slippery sport had made good his escape.

Later in the evening the Man from Dead Diggin's entered the 'Way Up Saloon, the sound of music saluting his ears long before he crossed the threshold.

Within the saloon he found, "da Counta Caboto" industriously engaged in grinding out a lively tune, much to the satisfaction of the assembled listeners.

Almost as soon as Dan appeared, the bully, Bouncer Bob, came toward him.

"Hain't seen er derved thing of thet ole cuss!" growled the tough.

"Who d'yer mean?" asked Dan.

"W'y, Ole Jed Corker, to be course."

"Oh, I hed completely fergot all 'baout thet critter," truthfully asserted Dan. "Thar is bigger fish on han'."

"Sho!"

"Yep."

"W'at?"

"Did ye ever heur of Violet Vane?"

"You bet! I hed a pard as seen him over ter Coffin City."

"Waal, he's in this town."

"No?"

"Yep."

"W'at's he hyer fer?"

"Arter me."

"W'at?"

"Straight goods."

"Is he a detective?"

"Yep."

"Then his goose is cooked!"

"Shanty City is a bad place fer him."

"You're shoutin'! W'at's he want of you?"

"Oh, he's arter me fer a little job."

"Want him planted?"

"I do."

"Money in it?"

"Some."

"How much?"

"Waal, he's a mighty bad man—"

"Ef all I hear of him's true, thet's so."

"I'm willin' ter pay well, but ther dern of it is ter find him."

"How's thet?"

"He goes disguised."

"Oh, thet's his game? Wal, I reckon he'll hev hard work ter fool this town."

"I am not so sure of thet. He's a cool 'un at it, an' he seems ter hev more lives than a cat."

"Wal, how much'll ye guv ter hev him planted?"

"A clean hundred."

"Jest you p'int him out an' I'll do ther job!"

"Ther p'intin' out will be no fool job."

"Do you want me ter keep arter Ole Corker jest ther same?"

"Yep. He is one of Violet Vane's pards."

"Wal, I hev bin lookin' 'most ev'ry derved whar fer him, but he keeps out of sight. Jest let him show up, an' I'll work a row with him some way."

"All right; thar he comes now."

Through the open doorway sauntered the very person they were speaking of, his white hat pushed far back on his head and his hands thrust deep into his pockets. Pausing in the center of the room, he stared around in a manner that plainly said he meant to take in all there was to be seen.

"Go fer him!" urged Dagger Dan; "but remember he's er hard ole nut ter crack."

"I kin crack him ef ary derved galoot kin," asserted the bruiser, as he thrust back his sleeves and spat on his hands. "Jest watch me paralyze ther ole hayseed!"

"Member I want him kilt!"

"O. K."

"No kill, no money."

"He'll be fit fer a wooden overcoat w'en I gits done with him."

But as Bouncer Bob was about to advance on Old Jed, a shrill scream was heard at the door, and a little old woman came flying into the saloon, seeming nearly scared out of her wits.

The new-comer was dressed in an old-fashioned black silk dress—a garment of many frills and furbelows. On her head was a queer little bonnet of black material, and in her hand she carried a black parasol that had evidently seen many years of service.

"Landy sakes to goodness!" panted the little woman, staring around inquiringly. "I never was so mortally skeered in all my born days!"

Instantly Old Jed Corker jerked off his hat and advanced toward the strange comer in the saloon.

"Ex-cuse me," entreated the old fellow, bowing low. "At what war yeou alarmed, Mis' Swan?"

"Oh, is that you, Mr. Corker?" cried the woman, in evident relief.

"Yas, it's me; don't ye be 'fraid."

"I am so glad!" and she clasped his arm. "I was never, never frightened so before! It was that horrid, horrid ragged creature who wears a sunflower in his buttonhole! I was just takin' a little preamble to get the cool evening air, when he came right up to me and began to talk. He told me it was not safe for me to be out alone in the evening, but I divined his pretensions in a minute. He wanted to get a chance to walk with me—the horrid thing!"

"That's jest it!" shouted Corker, excitedly. "Ther golderned—ah! 'scuse me, marm!—ther onmannerly scoundrell! I'll punch his ding blanked head fer this! I kin do it!" added Old Jed, glaring around as if to see if any one disputed the assertion. "I'm a purty gosh-danged hard boy ter daown when I git started, an' northin' starts me sooner then ter see a female woman insulted. Ef thet ole sunflower rapsallion war only heur—"

He paused suddenly, as Erastus Wagg appeared in the doorway, glancing around till his eyes rested on the little woman in black. Sad to relate, Old Blossom had been drinking, and was slightly intoxicated. He grinned with satisfaction when he saw the "widder."

"Zere she ish!" he cried, striking an attitude meant to be impressive, but which was simply ludicrous. "Zere's ther gal! Needn't run fer me, misish; I w'dn't hurt ye. I wash only givin' yestraight 'dvice. Dangerush for a wom ter be out in zish town at zish time o' ni—yesh it ish."

"Oh, save me from him!" cried the little woman, clinging frantically to Jed Corker's arm. "He nearly frightens me to death! Go 'way, sir! Shoo! Scat!" and she shook her parasol at the vagabond. "I do believe you are intoxicated!"

"Intozzercated?" cried the tramp, reproach-

fully. "I deny th' azzertion! I'm all ri'. All I need ish plenty room. I 'sh only got a little tetch o' th' rickerty rickets, zash all. I can shee—I can shee like a heagle. Got good eye, I hash."

"Stan' right heur, Mis' Swan," said Jed Corker, pulling off his coat and dropping it on the floor—"stan' right heur an' see me lick ther stuffin' aout of that critter! I'll larn him ter insult lone an' defenseless female wimmin! My Corker blood is up, an' naow I am a corker!"

"Oh, please don't fight!" entreated the widow, still clinging to him. "I'm so 'fraid you'll get hurt!"

"Let me tell yer thar hain't going' ter be no fightin' hyar!" said Bouncer Bob, as he placed himself before Corker, glaring viciously at the Man from Clam Cove. "This hyer's a peaceable place, an' thar hain't goin' ter be no row. Rather then hev a row, I'll lick ther all two both of ye!"

CHAPTER XI.

VIOLET VANE MAKES HIS MARK.

PLACING his hands on his hips and thrusting out his under jaw in a brutal fashion, the bully of Shanty City cast a look on Old Jed Corker that was plainly meant to seriously frighten the Man from Maine.

But Corker was not easily frightened.

"Wa-al, b'gosh!" he exploded, returning the ruffian's stare with interest. "Yeou've got gall? This hain't none of yeour raow, so yeou'd best git aout."

"Woosh!" snorted the Bouncer. "Thet starts my dander! I'm goin' ter chaw ye up!"

"Wa-al, naow, I'll make gol-darned tough chawin'!"

"Say yer prar's."

"Yeou'd best do that."

"W'at, me?"

"Yes, yeou."

"Haw! haw! haw!" roared Bob. "Jest heur thet! Hain't thet enough ter make a cat laff! Haw! haw! haw!"

"Haw-haw if yeou want ter!" snapped Old Jed. "I'll make yeou haw-haw aout of ther other corner of yeour maouth!"

Still the "widdier" clung tenaciously to his arm.

"Oh, dear! oh, dear!" she sobbed. "Please don't fight—please don't, Jeddie!"

The name seemed forced from her lips, and for a moment it seemed to stagger Corker; but the Yankee quickly recovered, slapped his knee, and shouted:

"By chaowder! I'll wade through rivers of blood fer yeou naow—Susan!"

"Call me *Susie*," simpered the little woman, seeming to forget her terror for a moment.

Corker caught his breath with a convulsive gasp, and the next moment he had passed an arm around the "widdier's" waist.

"Don't yeou be skeered no more," he softly said, bending his head toward her. "I'll purtee' ye!"

"Oh, you are so good and brave!" she sighed, leaning her head against his shoulder, quite regardless of the eyes upon her.

"Whoopee!" squealed Old Blossom, attempting to dance a little, and succeeding in falling down in a most clumsy fashion. "That shettles it! Misher Cuc-cuc-corker, I congrazzulate ye! I trusht you'll shend me cardsh. I mean weddin'-cardsh, not any old poker pack."

"Sir," returned Corker, with attempted dignity, "I don't know haow ter play poker."

Old Blossom sat up with his back against the door-casing.

"Don't know how ter play pokersk?" he repeated, a silly grin on his homely face. "Waal, th' widders'll learn ye how arter she becumsh Mrs. Corker. I'll bet a million dollarsh she kin hold a full hand—full o' hair. Whoop!"

"Oh, the horrid creature!" cried Mrs. Swan, stamping her foot with anger. "That is an insult!"

"That's so!" shouted Old Jed. "Do not detain me—*Susie*! Let me punish the rapscallion as he deserves! I'll larn him ter insult yeou!"

"Never insulsted nobozzy," protested the tramp, struggling to his feet and steadying himself with a hand against the wall. "I don't want'er fi'. Lesh hev shumshin' ter drink. You're good fellersh, Corker, only you've got haysheed in your whiskersh. I ushter shing a shong 'bout th' 'Ol' Home Down on th' Farm.' One stanzash had lines like zish:

'Every haysheed I would pass
It had whiskersh made of grass.'

That shong makesh me think o' you, Corker—

yesh, it doesh. Only your whiskersh look like they wuz made of straw. Shay, letsh take shumshin'."

Corker fairly danced with excitement.

"Naow, I will lick ther critter!" he yelled, smiting his clinched hands together. "Let me go, *Susie*! I'll pulverize him! Let me go!"

"Never, never!" she shrieked, flinging her arms around his neck. "I will not see you thrust yourself into such deadly and imminent peril! It would be awful! I am so frightened! I did not know what kind of a place this was, or I would not run in here!"

"I told ye you oughter hev a 'scort," nodded Old Blossom. "Hey-up!" he cried, trying to catch his tall hat, as it toppled from his head. "Where you goin', you twenty-dollarsh tile? If I don't hev you ter wearsh, I'll ketch cole in my hair."

But the old hat escaped him and went bounding over the floor like a thing of life. It landed in front of Corker, who immediately gave it a kick that sent it up against the boards overhead.

"I jest wish that war yeou!" he cried, glaring fiercely at the tramp.

"Might jes' as well hev bin," asserted Old Blossom, bracing up for all he was worth. "I never 'low nobozzy ter kick thet hatsh. Now you will hev ter fight!"

In a belligerent attitude, he advanced toward the Man from Clam Cove. Immediately Old Jed broke from Mrs. Swan's restraining arms, and started to meet the wearer of the sunflower.

Bouncer Bob fancied the time had come for him to get in his work, and he seized Corker by the shoulder, growling:

"Hole on! Didn't you heur me say thar wuzn't goin' ter be no fightin'? I see I'll jest hev ter shake you clean outer your clothes."

But an unexpected thing occurred. Widow Swan gave a scream and flew at the big tough like an enraged cat. In a moment she was pounding Bob over the head with her parasol, regardless of the fact that the shade was ruined at the first blow.

"You scalawag! you wretch! you scamp!" she shrieked, as she continued to wield the parasol. "You horrid thing! you miserable rascal! you—you—you—"

She seemed at a loss for appellations, but that did not cause her to desist in her attack.

Bewildered and confused, the bully released his hold on Corker, and tried to grasp the parasol. The next moment Old Jed's fist caught him under the ear, lifting him off his feet and hurling him headlong to the floor.

Old Blossom had paused in his advance, and he now uttered a whoop of delight.

"Great jehocus!" he bellowed. "Thet wash beaucherful, Misher Corker! Guv it ter ther critter erg'in! Kick a lung out o' him! Larn him ter meddle wish our 'fairsh when we are goin' to have a peashable fight!"

But Old Jed scarcely noticed the bully after Bob was knocked over. He turned to the widow, saying anxiously:

"Are yeou hurt, *Susie*?"

"No!" she gasped; "but I am so frightened! Ketch me, Jeddie, or I shall fall!" And she deliberately fell into his arms.

The Italian, who had been a witness of all that passed, now seemed suddenly frightened nearly out of his wits. Swinging his organ to his back, he muttered:

"I noa lika da fight! I think I taka Caboto outa here! Somebody gita burta!"

In order to reach the door, he was forced to pass near Bouncer Bob, who was just getting on his feet. There was a look of unutterable fury on the bully's face, and the Italian saw him draw a knife. Jed Corker's back was toward the man he had knocked down, and the ruffian plainly meant to stab the Man from Clam Cove.

"Greata Scotta!" gasped Caboto, and quick as a flash, he ran against the bully, knocking Bob over once more.

"Hully chee!" added the Italian, apparently in the greatest terror. "Looka out for da man with da knife! He killa pritta quicka! Looka out!"

Then he darted for the door and quickly disappeared.

This probably saved Jed Corker's life and put him on his guard.

Old Blossom had witnessed the peril of the Man from Maine, and the tramp had tried to draw a revolver, but his intoxicated condition had prevented him from doing so with his usual swiftness. However, he produced the weapon by the time Bouncer Bob scrambled to his feet once more.

"Whoop-ee!" he shouted, reeling forward, the grin still on his face. "This is ther fusht ruction

shince strikin' thish town! Hain't it fun! Oh, theresh nuzzin' doesh me shole good like a ruction?"

The bully was about to attack Jed Corker once more, but the sunflower tramp cocked his revolver and covered Bob.

"Chain ri' up!" he gurgled. "I hash got ther drap, an' I can shoot ef I hash bin drinkin'. Ef you try ter cut Misher Corker, dinged ef I don't ventilate you!"

Bob halted in dismay.

"You blanked fool!" he snarled, glaring at Old Blossom; "he was goin' ter lick you!"

"Waal, why didn't ye let him try it? You hain't got no bishness meddlin' wish our 'fairs. If we wan'sh ter hev a soci'ble fi', 'taint none o' your funeral. Go bag your head, you wopper-jawed catamount!"

The Bouncer danced and howled with rage, but Old Blossom seemed cool as a cucumber.

Turning to Corker, he went on:

"Misher Corker, I reg'et thish disgrace ter humanity shpoiled our fun, but we kin hev it out some ozzer time. Ash it ish, you had better 'scort' th lady out o' hyer. It hain't no plashe for her. I will kiver your retreat, an' if zish critter triesh ter tetch ye, I'll shend him ter Glory by ther lightnin' 'spress—yes, I will!"

"For the landy sakes, do let's get out of here!" panted the little widow, who was really frightened. "I know I shall just die dead if I stay here any longer!"

Old Jed picked up his coat, saying:

"Come on."

She accepted his arm, and he escorted her toward the door. Once Bouncer Bob seemed on the point of starting after them, but Old Blossom placed himself directly in the bully's path, shaking the long-barreled revolver in the ruffian's face.

"Go a leetle slow, Robert," he advised. "I kin shoot ther hull top o' your cabeza off. I kin hit a ten-shent piece when I'm sho drunk I can't shstand on my feet. Zat's a fac', ol' boy."

"You shall pay fer this!" howled Bob.

"You'll have ter sharge it; I'm dead broke."

"I'll hev yer skelp!"

"Zen you musht be goin' inter zer wool bishness."

"You shell die!"

"No I won't nozzet! Barber wanted ter dye it fer me oncet, but I kicked. Zis color's good enough fer me."

"Ef I only hed bolt of ye!"

Old Blossom winked in a comical manner.

"But you shee you hain't got holt o' me. We cant have all our wishes gratified in zish worl' o' sorrer an' shin, Robert. Ef you bed holt o' me, ye might wish ye didn't. Zis ish one o' my days. Jesht now I'm a bad, b-a-a-d, bad man. I kin chaw up spikes ter-day."

"You kin blow, but thet is all. You don't durst putt down thet gun an' tackle me fair an' squar'."

"I don't?"

"No."

"Who tole ye so?"

"I know ye don't."

"Waal, right thar's whar ye foolsh yershelf."

With a bravado born of the liquor he had swallowed, the sunflower tramp lowered the hammer of his revolver and thrust the weapon out of sight into a pocket, much to the surprise of all but himself.

"I tole you zis wus one o' my daysh," he grinned, steadying himself with his feet wide apart. "You want ter look out fer me. I'm a lulu when I git on it, an' by jehocus! I'm on it now!"

Chuckling with evil delight, Bouncer Bob advanced on the vagabond. He had been foiled in taking the life of one man, and his fury being up, he would have the life of another.

"Put up yer knife zere!" cried Wagg.

"Yes, I'll put it up ter ther hilt in you, dern ye!"

As the wretch sprung forward, Old Blossom dodged awkwardly to one side, crying:

"Fair play!"

Some of the others in the saloon echoed the cry, but no one seemed inclined to protect the tramp against the treacherous rage of the bully. Bouncer Bob was too well known in Shanty City for them to wish to make him their enemy.

Bob succeeded in catching Old Blossom by the collar.

"Now," he grated, "you have it!"

The knife was lifted and quivered in the air! In another moment it would have been buried in the vagabond's body!

Crack!

Somewhere outside the saloon sounded the report of a revolver.

The knife fell from the ruffian's hand, and

Bouncer Bob uttered a howl of agony, holding up a wrist that was shattered by a bullet!

From an open window came these words, plainly heard by all:

"With the compliments of Violet Vane!"

CHAPTER XII.

WHICH IS VIOLET VANE?

BOUNCER BOB howled like a dog that had been kicked.

"I'm killed! I'm killed!" he cried. "Ow-wow-wow! I'm bleedin' ter death! I've got ter die! Ow-wow-wow! Go fer a doctor! Go fer a Gospel-sharp! See the blood! Ow-wow-wow! This is ther eend of me! I've bin murdered! I'm dyin'!"

Then the natural cowardice of the man came to the surface. Brutal bully that he was, he was nearly frightened to death by the sight of his own blood. True, his wrist was broken, but the injury was far from fatal, and the shock had so benumbed his arm that he scarcely felt a sensation of pain.

Up to this moment, Dagger Dan had simply been a spectator. From his appearance one would scarcely have thought he had any interest at all in the affair; but as soon as he heard the words which came through the open window and witnessed the result of the shot fired by an unseen hand, he jerked out a revolver and started for the door, crying:

"Foller me! I'll guv a clean hundred dollars in cash fer ther capture of ther galoot w'at fired thet shot. Kem on, ev'ry man of ye!"

A hundred dollars! There were half a dozen men in the room who would cut a throat to obtain that sum, and the Man from Dead Diggin's did not lack followers.

Out into the darkness rushed the party, revolvers in hand.

"Search ev'rywhar!" shouted Dagger Dan. "Don't let ther critter 'scape."

Old Blossom was quite forgotten by everybody. The vagabond had been astonished and sobered by his preservation from what seemed almost certain death. He had heard and recognized the voice of the Velvet Sport.

"Sweet Violets, ur I'm a sinner!" he muttered. "Ther leetle dandy is on his feet an' right hyer in Shanty City! Whoopee! I jest want ter git holt o' his fin! He saved my life then—yes, he did! I don't fergit them things! Oh, jehocus! w'at a ga-lorious triumph keerd thet boy is!"

He heard Dagger Dan's words, as the fellow rushed from the room, knife in hand, but they only caused Erastus to laugh.

"Ef you ketch thet boy, you'll be good at ketchin' eels," he chuckled. "He's ther slipperyest leetle devil ever you went arter!"

Bouncer Bob did not pay any attention to the vagabond, but Old Blossom could not refrain from giving the tough a parting touch.

"Got struck by lightnin', didn't ye!" he laughed. "Thet's my ole side pard thet socked ye. You may thank yer good luck he didn't take a noshun ter blow ther roof o' yer cokernut off."

With that, the tramp ambled serenely out of the saloon.

Once more the search for Violet Vane proved unavailing. The only person found in the vicinity of the saloon was the Italian organ-grinder, and he was curled up close to the wall of a cabin not far away, apparently fast asleep. When aroused, he muttered:

"Letta Caboto 'lone. He sleepa—hedreama 'bout da monk'—thinka hava da monk' some mora. Goa off!"

When they left him, he settled down once more, appearing quite as contented as if in the best of beds.

Dagger Dan was furious.

"This is the second time ter-night!" he fumed. "Kin thet derved sport come in hyer an' defy us in this yar way? He must be found!"

"W'at'll ye do with him w'en ye find him?" asked one of the men at his side.

"Lynch him—hang him ter ther nearest tree!"

"Fer w'at?"

"Wal—fer anythin'."

"Kin you bring a charge 'g'inst him?"

"Yep."

"One thet'll hang him?"

"Yep."

"W'at is it?"

"Hoss-stealin'."

"Thet'll do. Whose did he steal?"

"Mine."

"Whar?"

"Over ter Dead Diggin's."

"Any proof?"

"Yep."

"Who?"

"Bowery Ben."

"Thet'll fix him. Ef he's ketched, he'll go up."

"He's a hard man ter ketch."

"I've heerd so."

"I'm goin' ter offer a standin' reward o' a hundred dollars fer his capter."

"Ef ye do, he'll be scooped."

"I shell do it ter-night."

Back into the saloon returned the unsuccessful crowd of searchers. Bouncer Bob was still there, the physician of the camp having been summoned to attend to him.

Burt Bishop was also there, and the young tough greeted Dagger Dan with a sneer.

"Well this is a rum go!" he cried. "You're a spruce gang, you are! I'd like to have some of the coves off ther Bowery here! We'd soon see if this snoozer could run all around us like we was asleep."

"Oh, you dry up!" growled the desperado. "You're always blowing erbout ther Bowery. Guv us a rest, will ye!"

"You're asleep enough to get all the rest you need. What you want is to wake up and get a move on."

"Wal, you come with me. I'm goin' ter git out a paper offerin' a hundred dollars reward fer ther capture of this galoot."

"What'll you do with him after you have nipped him?"

"Hang him fer stealin' my hoss. You 'member he stole my hoss over ter Dead Diggin's?"

"Course I do. But ye can't hang a man for that."

"Can't, eh? Wal, thet shows you don't know much erbout this kentry. Hoss-stealin' is ther greatest 'fense on ther list out hyer. Kem on an' help me make out thet paper."

Giving the signal to three more of the men in the saloon, Dagger Dan led the way toward a back room. A few minutes later the party was seated around a small table on which burned a smoking lamp. Dan surveyed the faces of those present.

"I kin trust ye all, I see," he said.

"You kin," was the reply, spoken as one man.

The leader nodded.

"I knowed it. Now it is plain ernough thet this Violet Vane is hyer in disguise, but jest w'at is his disguise? Thet's ther question. Thar are several strange people hyer, any one o' which might be him."

Burt Bishop lighted a cigarette, listening with something like a sneer on his face.

"Ef we only knowed which was ther right one," continued Dan, "then it'd be plain an' easy sailin'. I hev got an ijee I know."

"You hev?"

"Yep."

"If you've got an ijee, hang on to it," advised Burt Bishop. "You don't come across one every day."

Dan scowled at the young tough.

"I kin stan' a good deal," he asserted, "but some day you'll jest step over ther limit."

"Then what?"

"Thar'll be a funeral!"

Bishop smiled, but made no retort.

"Now," Dagger Dan went on, "I'm goin' ter tell ye w'at I think. I reckon ther Widder Swan hain't jest w'at she 'pears ter be."

"You don't mean—"

"But I jest do!" interrupted the desperado, bringing his clinched fist down on the table with a resounding thump. "Ef thet widder's w'at she 'pears, I'm a derved fool!"

"But it can't be—"

"Now why can't it? Violet Vane is a jo-dandy at disguises."

"And you think the widow is—"

"Violet Vane—exactly. I am not certain of it, but I think so."

"It don't seem possible," declared one of the men.

"I know it; but thet's jest why I think it is possible. He kin play any part he sets out ter."

"Well, the widow is not Violet Vane. See?" It was Burt Bishop who made the assertion, and he seemed to know what he was talking about. Dagger Dan turned sharply on him.

"W'at makes you think thet?" he asked.

"Because I know just who Violet Vane is."

"You do?"

"You bet!"

The young tough settled back in his chair and blew out a volume of vile-smelling smoke, while he stared around in a knowing manner.

"Look at here!" growled Dagger Dan; "ef you know ser much, jest you spit it out! Who is Violet Vane?"

"Did you evar spotta da Counta Caboto?" inquired Bishop, in perfect imitation of the Italian

organ-grinder. "He play de hand-org'—hava da monk' picka uppa da monk'. Hava harda lucka—loosen alla da monk' on da card. Greata Scotta!"

"W'at?" shouted Dagger Dan, in derision. "You don't mean ter 'sinate that ther Ilyetalian is Violet Vane?"

"I'll gamble my last chip on it," was the young tough's reply.

"Why, you're crazy!"

"Am I?"

"Sure."

"Perhaps I am, but I'm generally a pretty fly cove. I have been thinking about that Italian, and I am willing to wager something he is not what he seems. If I am right, is it not probable he is Violet Vane? Say, you, take a tumble!"

"By thunder! this may be so!" confessed Dagger Dan. "It is not so impossible as it looks at first."

"It's twicet as likely as it is thet ther ole woman is ther sport," agreed one of the men.

"An' thet derved Ilyetalian has been foolin' round us all ther time!" fumed the Man from Dead Diggin's. "Holy Moses! it gives me ther shivers ter think of it!"

"He wuz in ther saloon w'en ther Bouncer tried ter pick ther row with Jed Corker."

"Yep; but he got out."

"Got out jest in time ter fire ther shot through ther winder."

Dagger Dan sprung to his feet.

"Ther critter wuz snoozin', ur purtendin' ter snooze, over by Jackson's cabin," he said. "It hain't likely hedreams wes'pect him, an' he may be thar now. Ef he is, we'll soon find out ef he is this blamed sport. Come on, pards! Foller me!"

He led the way from the saloon, and the men followed close at his heels. Weapons were drawn as soon as they were in the outer air.

Woe to "da Counta Caboto" if he were found and proved to be Violet Vane! Sure and sudden death would be his portion.

Straight to Jackson's cabin hurried the men.

The organ-grinder was not there!

Both the Italian and his organ had disappeared, and further search failed to reveal whither they had vanished.

"Thet comes purty nigh settlin' it!" grated Dagger Dan. "I reckon ther critter is Violet Vane! I'm goin' back ter ther saloon an' stick up ther notice of a hundred dollars reward fer his capter, dead ur alive!"

CHAPTER XIII.

TWO LOVESICK OLD CRANKS.

DAGGER DAN kept his word. Within the 'Way Up Saloon he posted a paper offering a reward of one hundred dollars for the capture or positive proof of the death of Violet Vane, adding at the end that the Italian organ-grinder was suspected of being the sport in disguise.

"I reckon thet'll bring him," nodded the Man from Dead Diggin's, as he stood back and surveyed his work with satisfaction. "Ther skunk'll find he can't steal Dagger Dan's hoss an' then come snoopin' round whar ther rightful owner of ther anny mile is. I'm a dreadful bad coon ter fool with."

Having made this assertion he betook himself to The Den, but he left his satellites on watch for the Velvet Sport.

It was believed the Italian organ-grinder had made his way out of town as swiftly as possible after being left alone beside Jackson's cabin; and the citizens took the sudden departure as a positive sign of guilt.

But the masculine portion of the inhabitants of Shanty City were not all ruffians, by any means, and the friends of law and order were the enemies of Dagger Dan. However, the ruffianly element was predominant, and Dan's enemies were obliged to keep silent.

At the same time it would have been a good thing for the Man from Dead Diggin's if he had made sure both Jed Corker and Old Blossom were disposed of beyond doing him harm. The two queer old fellows were both friends of Violet Vane, and they industriously set about sounding the citizens of Shanty City for the purpose of discovering how strong Dagger Dan's clique was. At the same time they sought to make an impression in Vane's favor with those who were opposed to the proprietor of The Den.

Early the following morning after the events just related had taken place Old Blossom strolled into the 'Way Up Saloon to get an "eye-opener."

"Great holy jehocus!" he murmured, as he leaned on the bar and gazed longingly at the

display of liquor in the bottles on the back shelves. "Hain't I got a ga-lorious head on me this jubliferous mornin'! Waal, I sh'ud segashiate! My elegant 1776 silk hat will skeercely kiver my bump o' self-esteem, an' my beaucherful blue eyes feel like I had a bull wood-yard in 'em. I sa-ay, barkeep', can't ye let me hev jest a drap on tick ter keep me frum goin' stark starin' crazy?"

"It'll cost ye two bits," returned the barkeep'er, grimly.

"Putt it on ther slate—do!"

"Slate's broke."

"Then fer ther sake o' humanity, and in memory o' yer long-departed mother, fix me up a free drink. You see before ye the wreck o' a once proud and noble man. I hev seen better days, barkeep', but my glory hes departed. It wuz drink, *dr-r-r-rink* thet brung me ter this turrible plight! I'm a lost soul, but fer all thet, I've got a heart in me buzzum as big as a prize squash. Ef I hed one swaller o' likker left in my possession an' some pore cuss sh'ud come erlong nighly dead fer ther want o' it, I'd take it right out o' my pocket an'—an'—*drink it myself!* Thar, hy hokey! I've spoiled ther 'fec' of thet appeal! I hed ter tell ther truth! I'm like Worge Goshington. Now I'll hev ter pay fer ther likker an' go 'thout any breakfast."

Regretfully he fished around in his pockets till he found a silver quarter, which he slapped down on the bar, crying:

"Gimme jest as much as thet'll buy."

Having secured his drink, he straightened up, blinked his eyes and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand.

"Thet goes ter ther right spot!" he asserted. "It's galorious stuff, but it's got a reg'ler he-old bald-headed hornet's stinger 'tatched ter it. It sizzles all ther way down a feller's neck an' makes him wish his woozle wuz a yard long. Naow, seein' as I hain't goin' ter git enny breakfast, I reckon I'll hev ter take a chaw o' terbak-ker."

He produced a huge plug and bit off a large mouthful.

"I feel better," he declared, looking around the room. "I s'pose I must hev bin powerful nigh boozed las' night, ur else I'd not felt so this mornin'."

His eye caught Dagger Dan's poster on the wall, and he approached it. Thrusting his hands into his pockets, he began to read the notice, slowly spelling it out one word at a time.

"This galoot's a mighty bad speller!" he observed. "Now he spells capsher k-a-p-t-u-r, an' ev'rybody thet knows anythin' a tall knows ther way ter spell it is c-a-p-c-h-e-r, capsher. He must be a gol-danged ignerent critter! Never went ter school none, I reckon. Now look at here: he spells prisoner an' leaves out ther middle syllabul. P-r-i-s-n-e-r. Great jehocus! hain't thet a way ter spell it! It ought ter be p-r-i-s-u-n-o-r. Ef I didn't know how ter spell better'n thet, I'd go bag my head!"

Having read the notice all through, the tramp ejected a spout of tobacco-juice that struck the paper fairly in the center and spattered all over it.

"Thet's w'at I think o' thet!" he cried.

"Waal, you'd best keep clear of Dagger Dan when he hears who did that little trick," asserted the barkeep'er.

"Ter glory with Dagger Dan?" retorted Wagg. "He can't run this town while I'm livin' in it."

"Waal, then you won't be livin' in it a great while."

"No?"

"No; you'll be planted."

"In which case I'll be a sort o' whisky-plant, eh? Waal, strange an' improbable as it may seem ter you, I've never bin killed yit. Ef Dagger Danyil is goin' ter do thet leetle job, he's got ter rise long before daylight in ther mornin'."

"I'm goin' now. Ef I kin beg, borrry ur steal another quarter, I'll be roun' an' git another snifter himeby. So long, barkeep'." Then he drifted out into the cool and bracing morning air, feeling quite as wealthy as if he owned the whole of the town.

Old Blossom did not come back for another drink, although he "hit" Jed Corker for a quarter.

"Whut yeou want of it?" inquired the Man from Clam Cove.

The tramp struck an attitude.

"Kin you gaze on me emaciated frame an' boldly ask sech a question?" he cried, wildly flourishing one hand in the air. "Want? I'm perishin'—starvin'—dyin' o' hunger an' want! I kin eat ther off side o' a hull beef-critter—an' call fer more! Take compassion on me, oh, thou man o' wealth, an' save me frum a pauper's

grave. Ef ye can't let me hev a half, fifty cents will do."

"But yeou only asked fer a quarter in ther fu'st place, an' I cal'late yeou'd go drink it up, anyhaow."

The vagrant assumed an air of reproach.

"Now, kin you look on this shriveled figger an' say that?" he sighed. "Oh, I skeercely thought ye so heartless an' cruel! Thar is nothin' left fer me but suicide! Ef you hev a pinch o' snuff handy, I'll take it an' sneeze out my brains!"

Corker seemed struck by an idea.

"Tell yeou whut I'll do," he cried.

"Too late!" sobbed Old Blossom, wiping his eyes with his coat tails. "I am heart-broken!"

The Man from Maine seized Erastus by the arm.

"Come on!" he exclaimed, and then he dragged the vagabond into the hotel. Twenty minutes later the wearer of the sunflower was seated at a table on which was spread the best food the house afforded.

"Eat!" nodded Corker—"eat yeour fill!"

For a moment the "Sport o' ther Shaggy Pate" hesitated, then he observed:

"Waal, ef I don't make this fodder look sick 'fore I'm done, call me a durned fool!"

It was nearly an hour before Old Blossom emerged from the hotel and found Jed Corker waiting for him on the steps. Wagg was looking smiling and happy.

"Jeduthin," he said, "you're a jim-dandy! Let's go over ter ther saloon an' take suthin' at your expense."

But Corker declined.

"I hain't drinkin' naow; I've sworn off. It won't do fer a man ter drink thet is in my place, though I do feel good enough ter have one great big jubilee. I did mean ter lick yeou ther next time I saw ye, but I felt so good this mornin' that I kinder thort I wu'dn't."

Old Blossom surveyed the Yankee from head to feet.

"You do look kinder grinny-like," he said.

"W'at's ther matter?"

"I s'pose I'll have ter tell yeou," chuckled Old Jed. "I've bin wantin' ter tell somebody, but there hain't bin nobody I'd tell. Let's yeou an' I go fer a walk about this way."

"All right, pard."

The tramp took Corker's arm, and the two walked toward the outskirts of the town. When they were beyond the limit of the place, the Man from Clam Cove suddenly turned to his companion, saying:

"I'm goin' ter git merried!"

Old Blossom caught his breath with a gasp.

"No?"

"Yas, by gorrymighty!"

"How long since?"

"Las' night."

"An' ther widder—"

Corker slapped the tramp on the shoulder.

"Yeou've hit it!" he cried. "Haow did yeou guess? It's her. We're engaged."

"Waal, I swar! Rayther quick work thet."

"It war a case of love at first sight," confessed the happy man. "I war struck with her ther fu'st time I see'd her, an' larst night, as we strolled in ther gloamin', arter leavin' ther saloon, she confessed my commotion was reciprocated. She's an angel! We've set ther day!"

Old Blossom suddenly sat down on a small bowlder beside the trail, covered his face with his hands, and burst into violent sobbing.

Corker gazed at his companion in amazement.

"Heur, heur!" he cried, shaking the vagabond by the shoulder. "Whut's ther matter with yeou?"

For some time the ragged fellow did not reply, but finally he inquired, brokenly:

"I wonder ef thar is a fu'st-class undertaker in Shanty City?"

Amazed by the question, Corker answered:

"Hanged ef I know. Whut yeou askin' that fer?"

"I've got a job fer him."

"Yeou don't mean ter kill me arter whut I've done fer ye?"

"No."

"Whut then?"

"I'm goin' ter kermit screwicide."

"Whut fer? Great gosb! I didn't know ye keered so much fer ther widder."

"It hain't thet."

"Then whut in darnation is ther matter with ye?"

"I can't bear ter see you so happy w'en I know my case is hopeless."

"Yeour case?"

"Yep. I, too, am in love!"

"Sho! Git aout! Who's ther damsel?"

"Thet confounded leetle delicious Irish gal! I wuz smashed on her soon as I saw her."

"Waal, why don't yeou hoe in an' ketch her?"

Old Blossom arose and stretched himself to his full height.

"Why don't I?" he retorted. "Look at me—gaze on me an' see why I don't! I'm a dismantled wreck cast high an' dry—mighty dry—on ther rocks o' ruin! Thar is no hope fer me! It wuz only by deceit I won a lock frum ther fair critter. She thort me one o' her countrymen. But fer thet I'd been l-e-f-t, which w'u'd bin right. W'en she finds out how I hev fooled her, she'll despise mel. Oh, ther horror o' ther thort! I'll go drown merself with a quart o' whiskey—ef I kin git it!"

But Corker caught him by the arm.

"Ef yeou war dressed in decent clothes an' w'u'd let likker alone, you might stand a chainece o' ketchin' her."

"I'd do anythin' fer thet chance!"

"By gosb! heur she comes now! You must tell her you hev bin fooln' her an' hain't no Irishman a tall. I'll tell her fer ye."

"Ef ye do, I'll break ev'ry bone in yer boddy!" hissed Erastus. "Thet is my only fate. I'll play Irish all my life ef I kin only ketch her! I'll guv up drinkin'—I'll do anythin'!"

"Then git a brace on an' try yeour luck. Member try war never beat. I'll leave yeou alone with her. Play ther game fer all it's wu'th. Good luck ter ye."

Corker turned back toward Shanty City.

Wagg gave his high hat a rakish cant on his head, rearranged the sunflower he wore, brushed some dirt from the left knee of his shabby pantaloons, then advanced to meet the Irish girl.

CHAPTER XIV.

CAUGHT.

MAGGIE Magee smiled as she saw the queer old fellow approaching.

"Top av th' marnin' ter yez," called Wagg, gallantly lifting his hat.

"Th' soame ter vesilf," was her reply. "It's a foine marnin' it is, ter be sure."

"Thot it is, Miss Magee; but it sames loike it hed grown brighter an' sw'ater all av a suddint loike."

The girl smiled and turned her head away. Falteringly, Old Blossom drew nearer.

"Moight Oi wark a pace wid yez?" he timidly asked.

"Oi w'u'd be pl'azed ter hiv ye," she answered; but he noticed she cast an inspective look at his clothes.

"Me troonk has not arriv'," he explained; "an' so me wardrobe is in a somewhat debilitated condishun. But," he added, deliberately telling a falsehood, "Oi am somewhat proud av these rargs. They are th' resoolt av a fearful encounther fer loife in which Oi whipped eliven min, fathally injurin' siven av th' noom-ber."

Maggie Magee held up her hands in astonishment.

"Great hivvins! you moost be a perfect sly-clone!" she cried. "An' what wur th' cause av th' roow?"

"They unthertook ter rob me av me gold warch an' di'mon's," asserted Erastus, without a blush.

"An' did they succade?"

"Divil a bit—beggin' pardon fer th' worrud! They all roon fer their loives."

"Did thim thot wur fathally injured roon?"

"Hem! No, it wur th' others."

"An' so ye sbtill hiv yer warch an' di'mon's?"

The bold fabricator did not hesitate for a reply.

"I hiv not. It's th' ginerosity av me harrut thit deprived me av thim."

"How wur thot?"

"Well, ye see, Oi mit a widdy woman an' noine small childer. The poor crayther hid joost been burn't out av house an' home an' wur in a destitoot condition. Her situation immediately applied ter me sympathy, an' Oi gave her me purse, me warch an' me di'mon's."

"How ginerous av ye! An' how auld wur th' auldest child, did yez soay?"

"Th' little darlint wur ounly four."

"Mercy sakes! An' theer wur noine childer in all? Oi'm afraid Oi do not untherstand thot."

"Great jehocus!" thought Wagg. "Am I ketched now?"

But his ready brain invented an explanation.

"Ye see six av thim were twins."

"Och, hone! But thur wur thray more, an' th' auldest ounly four!"

"Yis; ye see th' other thray were *thriples*!" At this the girl sunk down on a handy stone and laughed heartily, while Old Blossom mentally exclaimed:

"Thank beaving, I'm saved!"

"Yer a marn afther me own harrut," asserted Maggie, as soon as she could speak.

"It's th' truth ye spake, me darlint!" and Wagg instantly threw himself on his knees at her feet, catching both her hands in his. "It's yer harrut Oi'm afther, Maggie! Yer brought oies hiv sint a new loight shinin' inther me saoul! They hiv stirred up me harrut loike a breakin'-up plow shtirrs an auld pasture! They hiv filled me wid emotions too numerous ter minton on account av space! Maggie, Oi love yez! Maggie, Oi warnt ter marry yez!"

And the old wretch was in earnest!

Neither of them had noticed that Jed Corker met the widow shortly after he left Old Blossom, and the two had been following Erastus and Maggie. Something like a snicker greeted the vagrant's concluding words, causing him to suddenly spring to his feet. Whirling, he saw Corker and the widow staring at him.

The man from Clam Cove came forward instantly, pulling Mrs. Swan by one hand, although she held back with evident bashfulness.

"Let's congratulate 'em, Susie," he said.

"It's plain thar are other folks in this ole worl' that are happy 'sides us."

And so, although Maggie Magee had not confessed a reciprocal feeling toward the woolly-headed man, they were congratulated profusely by Corker and the widow.

"This love-matin' is such a sweet and blissful thing!" gushed Mrs. Swan. "It makes one feel as if a little bird were singing in her soul! I do not suppose these great strong men experience the same commotion that we do, for they are not so susceptible as the gentle sex."

"Waal, we feel good enough fer 'most anythin'," assured Old Jed. "Thar can't any flies git on us, yeou kin bet yeour bottom dollar on that!"

Maggie seemed inclined to make a protest, but Mrs. Swan checked her with:

"There, there, dearie! Spare your blushes! I understand exactly how you feel! I do hope you have got a real good man, though he can't be equal to my Jeduthin."

"Oh, Susie!"

"Oh, Jeddie!"

And Old Blossom mentally exclaimed:

"Oh, thunder!"

Finding it inconvenient to make an explanation, Maggie remained silent.

Corker and the widow sat down close by, and for nearly half an hour the little woman's tongue rattled on as if worked by steam. Becoming tired of her talk, the Irish girl turned to Old Blossom and questioned him concerning the place known as The Den.

"Great hivvens!" he softly exclaimed. "Whut kin ye warnt to know about thot place fer?"

"Oi am goin' theer ter look fer worruk," explained the girl.

And, although the vagabond tried to persuade her to give over the idea, she seemed determined.

"Thot sames ter be th' ounly place in th' town," she said; "an' me money is gone. Oi must worruk somewheer."

To this Old Blossom knew not what to say.

Sometime later, the girl and the widow returned to town together, leaving Corker and Wagg to come back when they chose.

That very afternoon Maggie Magee made her way to The Den and applied to Dagger Dan for work. The desperado surveyed her critically.

"You look like a strong gal," he observed.

"Faith, an' Oi am."

"You w'u'dn't be very easy ter handle."

"Thot Oi'd not."

"W'u'd ye mind w'at kind of work ye done?"

"Not av it wurn't too harrud."

"It w'y't be hard a tall. Ye see thar's a crazy gal in ther ranch an' we only hev an old woman ter look arter her an' keep her frum hurtin' herself. Ther old woman hain't very strong, an' I fear ther gal might git ther best of her some time."

"Who is th' gel?"

"She's my sister."

"Poor thing! poor thing!"

"Ef I hire ye, you mustn't be too soft with her. Thet is, ye mustn't b'lieve all she tells ye. She's got some kind of a crazy notion inter her noddle thet I'm misusin' her, an' she thinks thar's a feller as is in love with her. It's all derved nonsense, ye understan'?"

"Sure, av ye soay so, Oi do."

"Wal, I do say so. Ter be course, you'd b'lieve me 'fore ye w'u'd her?"

"Yis, sor."

"Then you are ther very gal I'm lookin' fer."

It did not take long for Dagger Dan to make a bargain with the engaging Irish girl, and Maggie was at once taken into The Den.

"Remember, ye're not ter tell anythin' outside 'bout w'at ye see," said Dan. "Ef you sarve me faithfully, you shell be well paid; but ef you prove a traitor—wal, it'll go hard with ye!"

Having received her instructions, Maggie set about learning the run of the old building, Dan telling her she should take charge of his sister as soon as the girl saw fit to admit any one to her chamber.

"Ye see, she hes taken a freak," he explained.

"She's jest locked herself in her room, an' won't 'dmit a derved soul. But she'll cum roun' all right purty soon."

It was about midway in the afternoon that a man came rushing up to The Den and gave a peculiar signal that immediately brought both Dagger Dan and Burt Bishop from a room where, with some others of the rough gang, they had been gambling.

"W'at's ther row now?" demanded the proprietor of The Den.

"They've ketch'd him, boss!" panted the fellow.

"Ketch'd who?"

"Ther Dago!"

Dagger Dan gave a whoop of delight.

"Whar is he?"

"Over ter ther 'Way Up."

"I'll be thar in less then three minutes. Now Violet Vane shell git a taste of ther rope. I'll see thet he is wiped out."

Maggie Magee overheard all that passed, and a smothered exclamation of dismay escaped her lips when she learned the Italian had been captured.

CHAPTER XV.

LONA TO THE RESCUE.

STRAIGHT to the 'Way Up Saloon hurried Dagger Dan, with Burt Bishop at his side.

Quite a crowd had collected at the saloon, the report having gone out that the Italian was a captive.

As Dagger Dan came striding forward the throng fell back, allowing him to pass.

"Whar is ther critter?" he cried. "Show him ter me! All I want is ter git my paws on him!"

"Hyer he is," answered one of Dan's tools, as the captive was thrust forward. "We hev bin kinder washin' him up, an' thet hes changed his 'pearance some."

It was true a bath had wrought a great change in the supposed Italian. His appearance had altered so he looked very little like a "Dago."

Dagger Dan stared at the man in surprise, not uttering a word.

"W'at is it?" somebody asked. "It's ther sport, hain't it?"

The Man from Dead Diggin's gave vent to an explosive exclamation.

"Sport nothin'!" he cried, in disgust. "This hain't Violet Vane!"

"Wal, who in blazes is he, then?"

"Hanged ef I know, though his mug does look kinder familiar like."

Burt Bishop regarded the captive closely.

"Well, you're a sharp one!" he sneered, turning to Dagger Dan. "You ought to know that mug!"

"Who is it?"

"Why, it's the cove I played off as—old Marden's son!"

"Ther blazes!"

"That's just who it is."

"Yes," boldly spoke the captive, "that is who I am, you infernal scoundrels! You murdered my father, and I have been on your trail!"

"Waal, you hev found us," came grimly from Dagger Dan's lips. "All ther same, I kinder reckon you wish ye hedn't."

"You do not deny your identity; then why do you still talk in that fashion? You are Elegant Ed, scoundrel, gambler, villain—murderer! Drop the guise of Dagger Dan and be yourself!"

Burt Bishop whispered in Dan's ear:

"We must get him out of here without loss of time, or the devil will be to pay. He will give us away, and it may create an impression against us with some."

Dan nodded.

"Although this is not Violet Vane," he said, turning to Mark Marden's captors, "you have done well in grappling onto this fellow, and the reward is yours. He is a crazy fool who has

caused me much trouble, and I will now take charge of him till he can be placed in the hands of the proper authorities and conveyed to an asylum."

Unconsciously, he had dropped his dialect, much to the surprise of nearly all who heard him speak, for the citizens of Shanty City had thought "Dagger Dan" what he seemed. Now the mask had fallen; he was "the Man from Dead Diggin's" no longer, but Elegant Ed, the gambler—Tom Lewis, the silk-banded scoundrel.

Mark Marden knew what his fate would be if the wretch was allowed to carry out his design, and he turned to the crowd:

"I appeal to you, men of Shanty City," he cried. "This man is a desperado of the worst type. He murdered my father, as he means to murder me. Will you allow him to do so? You must have heard of Daniel Marden, of Magic! He was my father. This wretch—"

"There, there, that will do!" broke in Lewis. "Take him to The Den, boys. He will be safe there. Away with him!"

And despite his appeals, the unfortunate young man was dragged away by the villain's willing tools, while Lewis remained behind to set up the drinks for the crowd and pay the reward money to the men who made the capture.

But a sentiment had been created against Tom Lewis and his gang, although it was not openly expressed. It happened that neither Corker or Old Blossom knew of the Italian's capture. Had they known it, Lewis's enemies might have had a leader. As it was, the villain had left the saloon to return to the building called The Den, when both the Yankee and the tramp came rushing into the saloon.

"Whar is he?" shouted the ragged vagabond.

"W'at hev they done with him?"

"If it's Mark Marden, I know him," asserted Corker. "I have seen him."

Great was their excitement and indignation when they learned the captive had been taken to The Den.

"He'll be murdered! he'll be murdered!" cried Corker, fairly dancing with excitement. "We must do somethin' fer him!"

"An' by ther great jehocus, we will!" yelled Old Blossom. "We'll hev him out o' their han's ur bu'st our b'ilers!"

Mark Marden was indeed in deadly peril, for he had fallen into the hands of crime-stained men who were his worst enemies. He had pursued them—tracked them down—in disguise, for the purpose of bringing them to justice and seeing them properly punished for the murder of his father, and he could expect no mercy from them now that he had fallen into their power.

It was near night when Tom Lewis returned from the saloon. He was warmly welcomed at The Den.

"What are you going to do with Marden?" demanded Burt Bishop. "The fool has followed us here for the purpose of flinging us into the clutch of the law, but he has overstepped himself."

"That is true," agreed Lewis. "He has come to his death!"

"You will kill him?"

"He shall never leave this building alive!"

"But the people—what can you tell the citizens?"

"Hang the citizens! At least one-half of the town will side with us, if it comes to that. I shall not hesitate about ending Mark Marden's life."

Lewis at once proceeded to the room where the young man was confined, guarded by one of the gang. Bishop followed.

"You may go," said Lewis, to the guard.

"Tell the men to keep a sharp outlook."

The fellow retired, without a word.

Mark Marden was lying on the floor, his feet secured and his hands bound behind him. Tom Lewis sat down on a chair near by, while Burt Bishop remained standing.

"Well, Marden," sneered the chief villain, "your goose is as good as cooked."

There was no reply, but the captive gave his enemies a look of scorn.

"You will not talk, eh? Well, that is all right. The less you talk the better. All the same, I am going to ask you one question: If we will set you free, give you your life, will you take a solemn oath to immediately leave Shanty City and never trouble us any more? Will you swear to give over this hunt for vengeance?"

"No!" was the firm reply. "You murdered my father, Tom Lewis, and he will not rest easy in his grave till he is avenged. It is my place to do the work of the avenger, and if I am spared, I will do it."

"Answered as I thought you would. Well,

you will not be spared. You have but another hour of life. I will not snuff you out too quickly, for that will not give you a chance to make your peace with the Power Above. Still, one hour is all you have of life. At the end of that time I will send the executioner."

With this threat, he arose and left the room, Bishop following.

The hour passed swiftly, and the shadows of night were settling over Shanty City when the doomed captive heard the tread of feet which told him his chosen executioner was approaching. The door of the room opened and six men filed in, three of them bearing lights.

The prisoner had been unable to escape from his bonds, and as no window opened from the room to the outer air, he had found it impossible to signal to any one outside.

The six men who entered the room all wore masks which completely concealed their faces. Forming themselves in a half-circle, they all chanted in unison:

"We are the tribunal of death. By us you have been doomed to die. The executioner has been chosen, and we have come to see the work properly performed. Are you ready?"

Mark Marden made one more desperate effort to break free, but finding it, like the others, a failure, he cried fiercely:

"Yes, I am ready! Go on with your hellish work, but may the curse of Heaven fall on the man who takes my life!"

Again the masked men repeated in unison:

"The last minute has come! Executioner, do your work!"

Out from the half-circle stepped one of the men, baring his right arm to the elbow. From a sheath he took a long and wicked-looking knife. Mark Marden shuddered with horror as he saw the blade, but pressed his teeth firmly together, resolved to die like a man, without uttering a word.

The executioner advanced to do the deadly deed!

Suddenly the door was hurled open, and a lithe figure bounded into the room.

It was Lona!

The girl sprang to the side of the imperiled man and fell on her knees, horror expressed on her beautiful face and in her large blue eyes, as she thrust out her left hand toward the started executioner, as if to ward him off.

"Stop!"

Her voice rung out sharply, causing the man to come to a sudden halt.

"You shall not murder this brave man!" cried the girl. "I will protect his life with my own!"

CHAPTER XVI.

ON THE TRAIL ONCE MORE.

THE executioner halted in doubt, and one of the other masked figures uttered an exclamation of dismay and anger, his voice betraying him as the chief villain, Tom Lewis.

"Away with the girl!" he cried. "Let the work go on!"

Two of the men leaped forward to clutch Lona, and her shriek for help rung out wildly.

It was answered!

In at the now open doorway darted Maggie Magee, and with two skillful blows, knocked Lona's assailants over in a heap.

"Back, you devils!" cried the supposed Irish girl, in the plainest of pure English, speaking without the least trace of a brogue. "The first man to touch that girl dies like a dog!"

For a moment the ruffianly gang fell back in amazement and dismay. But they were not long checked.

"Who in blazes are you?" shouted Tom Lewis. Almost with one movement the false hair and the dress were cast aside. A man stood revealed!

"I am Violet Vane!"

It was in truth the Velvet Sport.

"Thunder and guns!" gasped Lewis. "It is that infernal bound!"

The daring sport retreated to Lona's side, passing her a knife, saying softly and hurriedly:

"Cut Mark Marden free! Be quick!"

Although somewhat dazed by the sudden transformation and appearance of the man she loved, the girl did not hesitate to obey.

Lewis saw her movements, and cried:

"Down with the cursed sport! Stop the girl! She is freeing the prisoner!"

"Hold!"

Violet Vane's voice rung out commandingly, and a pair of revolvers appeared in his hands.

"The man who advances a step dies in his tracks!"

Again the masked villains hesitated, for they saw before them a desperate man who was arm-

ed to the teeth. That hesitation gave Lona sufficient time to set Mark Marden free.

Tom Lewis uttered a peculiar cry that rung through the old building.

"It is a signal for the rest of the gang!" exclaimed the released captive.

Lewis laughed with evil triumph.

"You are right," he admitted. "Within a minute all my men will be here, and then we will crush you with sheer force of numbers."

For our friends the situation was desperate, indeed.

"We must cut our way out!" gritted Vane.

"Try it, if you dare!" returned the chief rascal. "It will mean a speedy death for you!"

"And it means death to remain."

"Yes; you are cornered anyhow. You have walked right into the snare."

"Take one of these revolvers, Marden," and Vane passed the weapon to the young man.

"We will sell our lives dearly, to say the least."

Lona was at his side, and she whispered in his ear:

"I am ready to die with you, my king!"

What a thrill of delight those words sent over him! Of a sudden he seemed like a new man. The strength of a Samson seemed within him. He forgot that he had lately recovered from a severe sickness. He was not ready to die, for the best part of his life seemed before him. He knew he possessed the love of the loyal girl at his side, and that was enough to make him a giant in battle.

"Come on!" he shouted, as he passed an arm around her waist—"come on, Marden!"

He was on the point of charging the ruffians when the sound of cries and heavy feet was heard approaching.

Others of the gang were approaching!

What was that?

A hoarse, muttering murmur that seemed to come from without the building—a sound that came nearer and nearer, and grew louder with each passing moment.

It was the roar of many voices!

Vane hesitated, and the ruffians of The Den seemed suddenly turned to stone.

Into the room bounded a breathless man, his face pale as that of a corpse.

"My God! we're lost!" he gasped. "Jed Corker and Old Blossom have aroused the honest citizens of the town, and the mob is coming to destroy this building!"

A savage snarl broke from Tom Lewis's lips, and he cast aside the mask that had covered his face.

"The fools!" he howled. "We will make it hot for them! But first we must down this infernal sport!"

Then came a thundering at the lower doors, while the mad cries of the mob could be heard all about the building.

"Down with Violet Vane!" screamed Lewis.

The ruffians sprang forward. Both Vane and Mark opened fire.

It is not possible to describe what followed. In a few seconds Vane had emptied his revolver, and that all of his bullets had not been wasted was attested by three bodies on the floor. The room was full of powder-smoke, and in the midst of the cloud the contestants could be seen swaying to and fro.

Suddenly Violet Vane received a blow on the head that hurled him senseless to the floor.

With a shriek of horror, Lona dropped on her knees beside him; but the following moment, she was snatched up in the arms of a strong man.

"Kill the sport!" shouted Lewis.

Mark Marden saw Vane fall, and he placed himself astride the unconscious man's body, resolved to bear the gang off with his bare hands.

But at that moment a great crash resounded through the building, telling the mob had forced the doors.

The voice of Old Blossom was heard shouting:

"Whoop! Hyer we cum, heads up an' tails a-risin'! Git out o' our road ef ye don't want ter be struck by a cyclone! Whar be ther skunks o' sin? Wow-wow-whoop! We'll guv 'em galory w'en we fall foul o' 'em!"

Lewis saw it was too late to waste further time with the Velvet Sport.

"Turn and fight for your lives!" was his order.

The ruffians wheeled and dashed from the room, leaving Mark Marden still standing over the unconscious Vane.

The battle that followed in the lower portion of the house was fierce and brief. The ruffians found they were overpowered, and the object

of many was to escape. This they did, only two or three besides those who were seriously wounded being taken prisoners. Tom Lewis and Burt Bishop were among those who got away, and Lona Lewis disappeared with them.

When it was found the chief rascal had really escaped, the dead and wounded were removed from the old building and the match applied. In a short time The Den was a mass of seething flames.

The blow Violet Vane received on his head was so severe he did not recover consciousness till the doomed building was fairly afire. Then he opened his eyes to find Old Blossom bending over him, while he lay on the ground, some distance from the burning Den.

"Glory ter ther ram!" squealed the sunflower tramp, as he saw Vane's eyes unclose. "You're all right, Sweet Violets! You're erlive an' kickin', leetle pard! I didn't know but yer sperrit hed flewed over Jordan's briny wave, but you hev cum roun'."

Vane started up, the red light of the fire on his white face as he stared at the flames.

"What does that mean?" he faintly asked. "Where is Lona?"

Old Blossom told him all that had occurred, explaining that Lona had disappeared with her villainous brother.

"My God!" groaned Vane. "They have dragged her away—they have torn us asunder once more! But as true as Heaven hears my vow, I will hunt them down and save her from them! They shall receive their just dues! I swear it!"

Then he fell back, fainting.

The regular stage was ready to leave Shanty City, and on it as passengers were Violet Vane, Old Blossom and Mark Marden.

Among those who had gathered to see them off were Daddy Duzenberry, alias "Old Jed Corker," and "the widder." The little woman was clinging tenaciously to Daddy's arm, as if she feared she would lose him.

"I wisht I war goin' with yeou ter help ye aout," asserted Daddy, as he clung to Vane's hand. "I'd go in a minute, but you see ther day is sot, an' Susie has scruples 'bout puttin' it orf. I wisht ye ther best of luck."

"Thank you," replied the sport. "I also wish you good luck in your matrimonial venture. As for me, I shall know no rest till I have kept my oath. Good-by."

The driver yelled and cracked his long whip, and the stage rolled out of Shanty City with Old Blossom standing on the top and waving his battered silk hat till a turn in the trail hid him from view.

Violet Vane was once more on the trail!

THE END.

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